GASTON LEROUX

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

CONTENTS

FOREWORD In which the author of this strange tale tells the reader how he came to be absolutely convinced that there truly was a Phantom of the Opera

01 Was it the Ghost?

02 The New Marguerite

03 In which Messrs Debienne and Poligny, for the first time, secretly make the Opera's new Directors, Messrs Armand Moncharmin and Firmin Richard, party to their real, hidden reason for resigning from the National Academy of Music

04 Box 5

05 The Magic Violin

06 A Visit to Box 5

07 In which Messrs Firmin Richard and Armand Moncharmin have the audacity to stage Faust in an ill-fated theatre with catastrophic results

08 The Mysterious Carriage

09 The Masked Ball

10 Forget the Name of the Man with the Voice

11 Above the Traps

12 Apollo's Lyre

13 A Masterstroke from the King of Traps

14 A Strange Request for a Safety Pin

15 'Christine! Christine!'

16 Mme Giry's amazing revelations of her personal dealings with the Phantom of the Opera

17 More about the Strange Request for a Safety Pin

18 The Police Inspector, the Viscount and the Persian

19 The Viscount and the Persian

20 In the Belly of the Opera

21 Concerning the interesting and instructive ordeals undergone by the Persian in the belly of the Opera

22 Inside the Torture Chamber

23 The Torture Begins

24 'Any old barrels!… Barrels!… Any old barrels for sale?'

25 Scorpion or Grasshopper? Which is it to be?

26 The End of the Phantom's Love Story

EPILOGUE

FOREWORD

In which the author of this strange tale tells the reader how he came to be absolutely convinced that there truly was a Phantom of the Opera

THERE truly was a Phantom of the Opera. He was not, as was long thought, a figment of the imagination of artists, the product of the superstitious minds of theatre managements, or some fanciful will-o'-the-wisp created by the empty heads of the young ladies of the corps de ballet, their mothers, assorted box-attendants, cloakroom girls and the stage-door keeper.

Oh yes! He existed all right, a creature of flesh and blood, though he strove hard to give the impression that he was a genuine phantom, in other words a ghost.

From the moment I began trawling through the archives of the National Academy of Music,* I was struck by the startling way that phenomena attributed to the *phantom* seemed to coincide with certain very mysterious, fantastic incidents which had taken place. It was not long before I had come round to thinking that, in rational terms, it might well be possible to explain the latter by the former. The incidents in question did not go back more than thirty years and, even today, it would not be hard to find respectable, elderly habitués of the foyer of the ballet* whose word is not to be doubted, who could remember as if it were yesterday the mysterious and tragic circumstances surrounding the abduction of Christine Daaé, the disappearance of the Viscount de Chagny and the death of Count Philippe, his older brother, whose body was found on the bank of the lake which lies beneath the Opera on the Rue Scribe side. Yet thus far it had never occurred to any of these witnesses that there might be a link between those appalling events and the almost legendary figure of the Phantom of the Opera.

The truth was slow to percolate into my brain which was struggling with an investigation that was constantly stubbing its toe on events which looked at first sight as if they had some sort of extraterrestrial dimension. There were times when I was ready to give up beating my brains and clutching at—but never catching—insubstantial will-o'-the-wisps. But in the end I got my proof that my intuition had not misled me and I was rewarded for all my efforts the day I became absolutely certain that the Phantom of the Opera had been more than just a ghost.

On the day in question I'd spent long hours immersed in the *Memoirs of a Theatre Manager*, a lightweight book by the over-sceptical Moncharmin who during the whole of his tenure at the Opera never understood any facet of the Phantom's behaviour and took every opportunity to debunk the idea, even when he was the first victim of the baffling financial sleight-of-hand business which happened inside the 'magic envelope'.

Feeling thoroughly depressed, I'd just left the library when I bumped into the General Administrator of our National Academy, a very sweet man, who was chatting on the stairs to a small elderly party with a lively manner and dandyish appearance. He introduced me at once. The Administrator knew all about my research and how eager I was to discover the whereabouts of Monsieur Faure, the examining magistrate in the famous Chagny case, who had retired. No one knew what had happened to him, whether he was dead or alive. And now, the first thing he'd done on returning to Paris from Canada where he had spent the last fifteen years, was to come to the offices of the Opera in search of a complimentary seat in the house. This tiny old man was Monsieur Faure in person.

We spent a good part of the evening together and he gave me a full account of what he had made of the Chagny case at the time. Lack of evidence had forced him to conclude that the Viscount had been mad and that his brother's death had been an accident. Yet he was still convinced there'd been some terrible quarrel between the two brothers over Christine Daaé. He couldn't tell me what had become of either Christine or the Viscount. Naturally, when I brought up the Phantom, he just laughed. He'd also been fully informed of those strange manifestations which at the time had seemed to indicate the existence of an exceptional being who lived permanently in one of the more mysterious recesses of the Opera House itself. He had also known about the business of the 'envelope', but had found nothing there worth retaining the attention of an officer of the law appointed to investigate the Chagny case. He had barely spared a few moments to hear the statement of a witness who had turned up willing to swear that he'd actually met the Phantom. This man—the witness—was none other than the person all Paris called 'the Persian'. He was a familiar figure in the Opera to all season-ticket holders. The judge thought he was deluded.

As you can imagine, I was keenly interested by this matter of the Persian. I wanted to locate this valuable, first-hand witness, if it were not too late. My luck was in once more. I managed to track him down to the small apartment he had in the Rue de Rivoli which he had never left and where he would die five months after my visit.

At first, I was wary. But once the Persian, with childlike candour, had told me everything he knew at first hand about the Phantom, and had given into my keeping proofs of his existence and especially the letters of Christine Daaé which cast dazzling light on her appalling fate, there was no possible room for doubt! No, no! The Phantom was no myth!

I am quite aware that people have hit back at me by saying that perhaps her correspondence was not genuine, that it could well have been forged from beginning to end by a man whose imagination was obviously overheated from reading too many sensational novels. But happily I was able to come up with a sample of Christine's handwriting which wasn't part of the famous packet of letters and so could undertake a comparative study which removed all uncertainties.

I also thoroughly investigated the Persian and came to see him as a man of integrity incapable of devising a plot designed to dupe the majesty of the law.

Actually this is also the view taken by the most eminent people who have had anything to do to a greater or lesser extent with the Chagny case, often friends of the family, to whom I showed all my documents and set out all my deductions. From that quarter I received the most generous encouragement. If I may, I will in this context reproduce a brief extract from a letter written to me by General D.

'*Dear Sir*,

'*I cannot urge you too strongly to publish the results of your investigations. I clearly remember that a few weeks before the disappearance of the great singer, Christine Daaé, and the events which sent the whole of the Faubourg Saint-Germain into mourning, there was much talk of the Phantom in the foyer of the ballet, and I do believe that people only stopped discussing it after the official outcome of a case which so gripped the public. But if it is at all possible, and I believe it is having heard what you have to say, to explain those events by reference to the Phantom, then I beg you, sir, tell us more about him. However mysterious the Phantom might seem at first, he will always be easier to explain than that dark tale in which ill-intentioned persons are determined to see two brothers who had loved each other all their lives tearing each other to pieces.*

'*I remain, etc.*'

In the end, file in hand, I went back and again explored the Phantom's vast domain, that grim monument which he made his empire, and everything that my eyes saw, everything my mind had pieced together, fully confirmed the documents shown me by the Persian. And then an amazing discovery was made which was the final culmination of all my work.

You will remember that recently, when a hole was being dug in the cellars of the Opera where the phonographed voices of artists were to be buried, a workman's pick laid bare a corpse. Here was my proof! That the body was what remained of the Phantom of the Opera! I persuaded the Administrator himself to touch it, with his hand, and now I do not care a jot if the newspapers say that what was found was a victim of the Commune.*

None of the unfortunates who were massacred in the cellars of the Opera during the Commune are buried on that side. I will spell out later where their skeletons are to be found, which was a long way from the huge crypt where all sorts of provisions were stored during the siege. Actually I stumbled on their trail while looking for the remains of the Phantom of the Opera and would never have found them if it hadn't been for the amazingly serendipitous accident of the burial of those living voices!

But we shall speak another time of that corpse and about what should be done with it. But for now I want to close this necessary foreword by thanking those overly modest participants, such as Inspector Mifroid of the Paris Police (originally called in to make the preliminary inquiries following the disappearance of Christine Daaé), or the Opera House's former secretary, M. Rémy; the former Administrator M. Mercier; the former chorus master, M. Gabriel; and most particularly the Baroness of Castelot-Barbezac who was once 'little Meg' (and is not ashamed of it), the most charming star of our magnificent corps de ballet,

oldest daughter of the respectable Mme Giry, now deceased, who formerly looked after the Phantom's box in the theatre. They assisted me greatly and thanks to them I can now, with the reader, relive those hours of pure love and terror.[1]

TO MY BROTHER JO

Who, though he is not at all ghostly, is nevertheless,
*like Erik, an Angel of Music**

Affectionately,
Gaston Leroux

01
Was it the Ghost?

On the evening which Messrs Debienne and Poligny, the Opera's outgoing Directors, had chosen to present their last gala concert as a way of marking their departure, the dressing room of La Sorelli, one of the leading ballerinas, was suddenly invaded by half a dozen of the young ladies of the corps de ballet who had just left the stage after 'dancing' *Polyeucte*.* They came tumbling through the door in total disorder, some choking with forced, nervous laughter, and the rest giving little yelps of terror.

La Sorelli had wanted to be alone for a moment to 'run through' the few words she was shortly to say in the foyer as a tribute to Messrs Debienne and Poligny, and it was with rising ill temper that she looked on as the scatterbrained flock pushed in behind her. She turned and was alarmed to see such panic. It was the sweet little Jammes girl—pert, Grévin-style* nose, forget-me-not-blue eyes, cheeks full of roses, and a lily-white throat and shoulders—who accounted for it in four words, in a quavering voice almost extinguished by horror.

'It was the ghost!'

And she turned the key in the lock.

La Sorelli's dressing room was done out with dull, official elegance. A full-length mirror, a divan, dressing table and clothes presses made up the basic furnishings. A few engravings hung on the walls, souvenirs of her mother who had known the glory days of the old Opera House in the Rue Lepeletier: portraits of Vestris, Gardel, Dupont and Bigottini.* The dressing room seemed palatial to the minxes of the corps de ballet who had to share accommodation where they spent their time singing, quarrelling, cuffing their dressers and coiffeuses and buying each other little glasses of blackcurrant liqueur or beer or even rum right up until the time when the call-boy rang for their entrance.

La Sorelli was very superstitious. When she heard Mlle Jammes mention a ghost, she shuddered and said:

'Silly girl!'

But since no one was readier to believe in ghosts in general and in the Opera's very own spectre in particular, she immediately demanded to be told everything.

'You saw him?' she asked.

'As clearly as I see you now!' wailed Mlle Jammes who, sensing her two legs about to give way, collapsed on to a chair.

Immediately young Meg Giry—eyes black as olives, hair like ink, swarthy complexion, her poor diaphanous skin stretched tight over her poor delicate bones—added:

'If it was him, he's ever so ugly!'

'Oh yes!' chorused the other girls.

And they all started talking at the same time. The ghost had appeared in the shape of a gentleman in evening dress who had suddenly loomed up before them, in the corridor, without their knowing where he'd come from. It happened so quickly that anyone would have thought he must have walked through the wall.

'Pish!' said one of them who had more or less kept a cool head, 'you lot see ghosts everywhere!'

It was true. For a good few months all anyone had talked about in the Opera House was this ghost in black tie and tails who walked like a shadow all over the building from top to bottom, never spoke to anyone (and no one dared say a word to him) and the moment he was spotted he vanished without anyone being able to say where to or why. He walked soundlessly, the way genuine ghosts do. At first, people had laughed and made fun of a spectre who was got up like a gentleman or an undertaker. But the legend of the ghost had soon reached colossal proportions among the young ladies of the corps de ballet. They all claimed to have encountered this unearthly being and said they'd been victims of his tricks—and those who laughed loudest were not necessarily those who felt safest. Even when he chose not to show himself, he would reveal his presence in incidents farcical or lethal for which superstitious minds (which meant virtually everybody) made him responsible. If there was an accident, or one of the girls played a practical joke on one of the other dancers, or a powder-puff went missing, everything was blamed on the ghost, the Ghost of the Opera!

But when it came down to it, who exactly had seen him? After all, you come across a good many gentlemen in black ties in the Paris Opera who are not ghosts. Still, he had one special habit which none of the other men in tails do: this one got himself up to look like a skeleton.

At least so the girls said.

And naturally, his head was a death's head.

Was there anything to it? The truth is that this tale of the skeleton had grown out of the description of the ghost given by the chief stage-setter and scene shifter, Joseph Buquet. He had really seen him. He had run across—you couldn't say 'had come face to face', because the ghost didn't have one—a mysterious figure on the narrow staircase near the footlights that goes straight down into the area under the stage. He'd seen him for just one second—the ghost had run off—but the memory of what he had briefly glimpsed had left an indelible mark on his mind.

Here is what Joseph Buquet would tell anyone who asked:

'He's tremendously thin and his coat hangs on a bag o' bones. His eyes are so deep-set you can't hardly make out the pupils which never move. In fact, all you can see is two great big black holes like sockets in a dead man's skull. The skin is stretched over the bones as tight as a drum, it's not white but a sickly sort of yeller.' E got no nose to speak of, you can hardly see it side on, and the fact that there's no nose *to see* is the most'orrible *sight!* Three or four brown strandy wisps across his forehead and behind his ears is all he's got in the way of hair.'

Joseph Buquet had tried to follow the strange apparition but in vain. The figure had vanished as if by magic and he'd been unable to find any trace of him.

The stage-setter was a serious, reliable, sober man, with not much imagination. What he said was heard with amazement and keen interest, and soon others came forward saying that they too had seen a man in a dress suit with a skull for a head.

Sensible persons who got wind of the story always began by saying that Joseph Buquet was the victim of a practical joke played on him by one of his assistants. And then occurred a series of incidents so odd and inexplicable that the coolest heads began to get worried.

Now an officer in the fire brigade is a brave man. He's not scared of anything, least of all of fire!

Apparently the fireman in question,[1] who had gone down to inspect the basements, cellars and vaults had ventured a little further than usual, had suddenly reappeared on the stage, ashen-faced, shaken and trembling, eyes popping out of his head, and almost fainted into the arms of the Jammes girl's worthy mother. And the reason? He had seen, *at eye level*, coming towards him, *a fiery head which had no body!* I say again: an officer of the fire brigade is not a man who is afraid of fire.

His name was Papin.

The whole corps de ballet were quite unnerved. To begin with, this fiery head did not fit Joseph Buquet's description of the ghost. The fireman was thoroughly interrogated, the stage-setter was questioned again, and in the end the young ladies convinced themselves that the ghost had several heads which he changed as the fancy took him. Naturally they were soon imagining that they were in the greatest danger. If a fireman did not hesitate to faint, then a ballerina and first and second dancers were perfectly entitled to invoke all sorts of excuses for the terror that made them scuttle as fast as their thin stick legs could carry them whenever they passed a dark recess of some badly lit corridor.

So much so that, to protect a building bedevilled by such baleful forces, insofar as was humanly possible, La Sorelli in person, accompanied by the entire corps de ballet and even the girls in the beginners' classes in their tights, had—the day after the business with the fireman—gathered round the table by the porter's lodge, on the side of the court where the administrative offices are, and on it placed a horseshoe which everybody other than a spectator entering the Opera was

obliged to touch before putting one foot on the bottom tread of the staircase. Otherwise he or she would become fair game for the occult power which had taken possession of the building from cellars to attics!

I have no more invented the horseshoe, alas, than the rest of this story. It can still be seen today on the table in the lobby just by the porter's lodge as you go into the Opera House through the court where the offices are located.

That gives a fairly clear idea of the state of mind of the dancers on that evening as we follow them into La Sorelli's dressing room.

'It was the ghost!' the Jammes girl had cried.

The uneasiness felt by the dancers went on deepening. Now a tense silence filled the room. The only sound was that of rapid breathing. In the end, Jammes, showing all the signs of genuine fear, had flattened herself against the furthest corner of the wall and whispered a single word:

'Listen!'

And indeed they all seemed to hear a rustling on the other side of the door. Not a sound of footsteps. It was like light silk brushing against the wooden panels. Then, nothing. La Sorelli tried to look less scared than the others. She moved to the door and in a toneless voice demanded:

'Who's there?'

But no one answered.

Then, feeling all eyes were watching her slightest move, she forced herself to be brave and said very loudly:

'Is there anyone behind this door?'

'Yes! There is! Of course there's someone behind the door!' repeated olive-eyed Meg Giry, heroically holding La Sorelli back by her net skirt… 'You mustn't open the door! O Lordy, don't open it!'

But La Sorelli, grasping the stiletto she always carried with her, screwed up her courage, turned the key in the lock and opened the door while the dancers backed away as far as her private inner sanctum and Meg whimpered for her mother:

La Sorelli looked bravely out into the corridor. It was deserted. A gas flame fluttering like a butterfly in its glass cage cast an uncertain red glow into the heart of the surrounding gloom but failed to make any impression on it. Then she quickly closed the door again with a deep sigh.

'No,' she said, 'there's no one there!'

'But we saw him!' said Jammes as she inched her way back to her place next to La Sorelli. 'He must be there somewhere, outside, prowling round. I'm not going back upstairs to get changed. We should all go down to the lobby together, at once, for the speech, and then all go back up together.'

At the same time, she devoutly touched the small sliver of coral which was supposed to protect her against evil spells. Simultaneously La Sorelli furtively used the tip of the pink thumbnail of her right hand to make a Saint Andrew's cross on the wooden ring on the third finger of her left hand.

One famous reviewer wrote: 'La Sorelli is tall for a ballerina, beautiful, with solemn, sensual features and a waist as supple as a willow branch. Most people reckon her to be "a fine figure of a woman". Her hair, as yellow and fine as spun gold, frames a smooth brow under which are set emerald-green eyes. Her head on a long, elegant, haughty neck sways gently, like a feathery plume. When she dances, she moves her hips in a manner that is not to be described but her whole body quivers with unutterable voluptuousness. When she raises her arms and bends forward before launching into a pirouette, thus revealing the contours of her bosom, or when the arch of her delicious body brings out the curve of her thigh, the sight is said to be enough to make a man blow his brains out.'

But in the matter of brains, everyone seemed to agree that she didn't have many. No one held it against her.

A second time she told the dancers:

'No girls, you must pull yourselves together… Ghost? What ghost? Maybe you didn't actually see it!…'

'No! No! We did see it!… We saw it a little while ago!' the girls said. 'He had a death's head and his black coat on, exactly the way he looked the evening he appeared to Joseph Buquet!'

'And Gabriel saw him too!' said Jammes, 'just yesterday! yesterday afternoon!… in broad daylight…'

'Gabriel? The chorus master?'

'Oh yes!… What, you didn't know?'

'And he was wearing tails, in broad daylight?'

'Who do you mean? Gabriel?'

'No, the ghost!'

'Of course he was wearing tails!' said Jammes. 'Gabriel told me himself… That was how he knew who it was. It was like this. Gabriel was in the stage manager's office. Suddenly the door opened. It was the Persian. You know the Persian's got the "evil eye", don't you?…'

'Of course we do!' chorused the young dancers who, the moment they'd conjured up the Persian in their minds, warded off Fate by holding their index and little fingers out straight while keeping their middle and third fingers pressed against their palm and holding them there by the thumb.

'Gabriel's ever so superstitious!' Jammes went on, 'but he's always very polite. Whenever he sees the Persian he usually just puts one hand quietly in his pocket and touches his keys for luck… Well, the minute the door opened and he saw the Persian, Gabriel leaped out of his chair and had his hand on the lock of the cupboard like a shot, touching iron! In the process, he caught his coat on a nail and made a great big tear in it. He was so anxious to get out of there, that he bumped his forehead on a coat stand which left an almighty lump; and then, stepping back quickly, he brushed one arm against the screen next to the piano; he tried to steady himself by leaning on the piano but unfortunately the lid fell on his hands and trapped his fingers; he rushed out of the office like a lunatic and was in such a hurry to get away from the first floor that he tumbled all the way down the stairs and ended up on his back. I happened to be passing just then with my mother. We rushed to help him to his feet. He was black and blue and there was blood all over his face. It gave us an awful fright. But all at once he smiled at us and started shouting: "Thank you, God! for letting me off so lightly!" Then we asked him what was the matter and he told us all about being frightened. Do you know why? He'd seen the ghost! It had been standing just behind the Persian! *The ghost with the death's head*, just the way Joseph Buquet had described him.'

A frightened hush greeted the conclusion to her tale. When Jammes reached the end, she was quite out of breath from having told it so fast, as if she were being chased by the ghost. Then there was another silence which was broken by a faint mutter from Meg Giry while La Sorelli, looking very flustered, polished her nails.

'Joseph Buquet should keep his mouth shut,' said she of the olive eyes.

'Why should he keep his voice shut?' asked someone.

'That's what Ma thinks…' replied Meg, in the barest whisper this time, and she looked all around her as if she was scared that what she said was being heard by more ears than were there present.

'And why does your Ma think that?'

'Keep your voice down! Ma says the ghost doesn't like being pestered.'

'But why does your mother say that?'

'Because… Because… oh nothing!'

Such knowing reticence had the effect of making the dancers even more curious. They crowded round Meg and begged her to say what she meant exactly. They stood there, elbow to elbow, craning forward eagerly in a single surge of pleading and terror. They communicated their fear to each other, feeling a delicious thrill which sent shivers up their spines.

'I swore I wouldn't say anything!' said Meg again in a low voice.

But they wouldn't leave her alone and promised they'd keep the secret until Meg, who was itching to tell what she knew, began, with her eyes fixed on the door:

'Well… it's all on account of the box…'

'What box?'

'The ghost's stage-box!'

'The ghost's got a box?'

At the thought that the ghost had a box of his own in the auditorium, the other girls could not contain the delicious sensation of the awful fear they felt. They gave little gasps and said:

'Oh Lordy! Tell all… let's have it…'

'Not so loud!' hissed Meg. 'It's in the first tier, number 5, you know, stage left.'

'It's not possible!'

'It's like I say… Ma's the attendant who looks after it… But you swear you won't tell anybody?'

'Of course, silly!…'

'Well, it's the ghost's box… No one's set foot in it for over a month, except the ghost of course, and the management has been told not to sell tickets for it, ever!'

'And does the ghost really use it?'

'I should say!'

'Someone actually comes?'

'Not someone, *the ghost uses it, but there's never anyone in it!*'

The girls looked at each other. If the ghost really used the box, he should be visible, because he wore a dress suit and had a skull for a head. That's what they tried to get Meg to understand, but she replied:

'But the point is you can't see the ghost! And he doesn't have evening dress or have a horrible head like that either!… All this talk about him having a face like a skull and a fiery head is all phooey! He doesn't have anything at all!… You can only hear him when he's in his box. Ma has never seen him, but she's heard him. And Ma should know. She's the one who gives him his programme!'

La Sorelli thought it was time she said something:

'Meg Giry, you're having us on.'

At this, the girl started to cry.

'I shouldn't have told… If Ma was to find out!… But one thing's for sure, Joseph Buquet should keep his nose out of what don't concern him… it'll bring him nothing but bad luck… Ma was saying so only last night.'

The same moment, heavy, heavy footsteps were heard hurrying along the corridor and a breathless voice called:

'Cécile! Cécile! Are you in there?'

'That's my mother's voice!' said Jammes. 'What's the matter?'

And she opened the door. A respectable woman, solidly built like a Pomeranian grenadier, swept into the dressing room and collapsed with a groan onto a chair. She rolled her eyes and the fear in them lit up her gloom-laden, brick-red face.

'What a terrible thing!' she gasped… 'It's horrible!'

'What is? What's happened?'

'Joseph Buquet…'

'What about Joseph Buquet…'

'Joseph Buquet is dead!'

The room was suddenly filled with cries of shock, disbelief and panicky demands for an explanation.

'It's true!… They've just found him hanging under the stage, on the third level down… *But the worst thing*,' the worthy lady went on breathlessly, '*the worst thing is that the scene-shifters who found the body are saying they heard a sound like a death march echoing over the corpse!*'

'It was the ghost!' Meg Giry cried instinctively and then, controlling herself, she put both hands to her mouth and added: 'No!… I didn't mean that… I didn't speak!'

The other girls gathered round her saying in terrified whispers:

'There's no doubt about it! It was the ghost!'

La Sorelli had turned pale…

'I'll never get to say my speech now,' she said.

Jammes's mother drained a glass of spirits she found on a table and gave her opinion: the ghost most certainly had had a hand in what had happened.

The fact is, no one ever discovered how Joseph Buquet died. The investigation into it was brief and its verdict was straightforward: *suicide.* In his *Memoirs of a Theatre Manager*, M. Moncharmin, one of the two Directors who succeeded Messrs Debienne and Poligny, gave his own version of this business of the hanged man:

> 'A most disagreeable incident cast a pall over the modest party organized by Messrs Debienne and Poligny to mark their departure. I was in the manager's office when M. Mercier—the Administrator—suddenly burst in. Visibly upset, he said the body of a man had been found, a stage-setter, hanging, in the area below the stage, three levels down, between a flat and a part of the set of the *Roi de Lahore*.* I said: "We must cut him down!" By the time I'd rushed down the stairs and scrambled down the frame ladder, the rope around the dead man's neck had gone!'

In other words, it was a circumstance in which M. Moncharmin found nothing untoward. A man is found hanging at the end of a rope. But when help arrives to cut him down, the rope has disappeared: odd. Of course, M. Moncharmin came up with a simple enough explanation. This is what he said: '*It was nearly time for the ballet and all the girls, seniors and beginners, had been quick to protect themselves against the evil eye*.' There, are you following? You can see it now, the whole of the company clambering down the frame ladder and cutting up and dividing a hanged man's rope among themselves in less time than it takes to write it down. It's laughable. When on the other hand I think of the exact spot where the body was found—under the stage, three levels down—I can imagine that there might just be *someone somewhere* who might want the rope to vanish into thin air after doing its deadly work. We will see in due course if I am right in imagining such a thing.

The grisly news had spread through the whole Opera House where Joseph Buquet was well liked. The dressing rooms emptied and the dancers gathered round La Sorelli like frightened sheep around a shepherd. Then they headed off down to the lobby, along ill-lit passages and stairways, scurrying along as fast as their pink little feet would take them.

02
The New Marguerite

On the first landing, La Sorelli met the Count de Chagny coming up the stairs. The Count, normally so calm, seemed greatly excited.

'I was on my way to call on you,' said the Count, greeting her with consummate gallantry. 'Ah! What an amazing evening! And Christine Daaé! A triumph!'

'That's hard to believe!' said Meg Giry. 'Six months ago she couldn't sing to save her life! But pray let us pass, dear Count,' she added with a cheeky curtsy, 'we're on our way to hear the latest about a poor man who's been found hanged.'

Just at that moment, the Administrator, looking flustered, bustled past but stopped as he caught her words.

'What? You girls have already heard?' he said curtly. 'Well, keep it to yourselves… and for heaven's sake don't breathe a word of it to M. Debienne and M. Poligny! It would be too upsetting for them on their last day.'

The dancers made for the foyer which was already packed.

The Count de Chagny was right. There had never been a concert like it. Those privileged enough to have been there still talk about it to their children and their grandchildren and thrill at the memory. Imagine: Gounod, Reyer, Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Guiraud and Delibes strode up to the rostrum in turn to conduct performances of their own works. Among the artists appearing were Faure and La Krauss, and it was on that evening that the astounded, ecstatic Paris audience was first introduced to Christine Daaé whose mysterious fate I have set out to reveal in this book.

Gounod conducted a performance of *La Marche funèbre d'une marionette*; Ryer, the fine overture from his *Sigurd*; Saint-Saëns, *La Danse macabre* and a *Rêverie orientale*; Massenet, a newly composed *Marche hongroise*; Guiraud, his *Carnaval*; Delibes, the *Valse lente* from *Sylvia* and the *pizzicati* from *Coppélia.* Mlle Krauss and Denise Bloch had sung, the first, the bolero for the *Vêpres siciliennes* and the second, the drinking song from *Lucrèce Borgia*.*

But the triumph was Christine Daaé's alone. She had begun with excerpts from *Roméo et Juliette*. It was the first time the young artist had performed any part of this work by Gounod which had not yet been staged at the Opera House. It had just been revived at the Opéra-Comique years after it was first performed at the old Théâtre-Lyrique by Madame Carvalho.* You can only feel sorry for those who never heard Christine Daaé as Juliette, never saw her innocent grace, were never stirred by her seraphic voice, never felt their spirits take wing above the tombs of the lovers from Verona: '*Lord! Lord! Lord! Forgive us!*'

But that was as nothing compared with the stupendous intensity she achieved in the prison scene and the final trio of *Faust* for which she replaced Carlotta who was indisposed. No one had ever heard or seen anything like it!

That night Mlle Daaé delivered 'the New Marguerite', a Marguerite of hitherto hidden splendour and radiance.

The whole auditorium erupted, carried away by their euphoria, cheering and applauding a sobbing Christine who collapsed into the arms of her fellow artists. She had to be helped back to her dressing room and looked more dead than alive.

The great critic P. de St.-V. preserved the memory of that wonderful night in a piece which he called 'The New Marguerite'. Like the great artist that he himself was, he revealed in the simplest terms what the beautiful, sweet creature had brought to the stage of the Opera that night: not just her *art*, but her whole *heart*. Every last devotee of the Paris Opera knew that Christine had stayed as pure as she had been at fifteen, and P. de St.-V. wrote that 'to understand the change that has come over Daaé, *it must be supposed that she has just discovered love for the first time!* I am perhaps being indiscreet', he went on, 'but only love could bring about such a miracle, so overwhelming a transformation. Two years ago, we heard Christine Daaé sing when she auditioned for a place at the Conservatoire. Then she seemed to be a charming prospect. *Where on earth did she get the glorious voice she has today? If it did not float down from heaven on the wings of love, I can only conclude that it rose from hell and that Christine, like the master-singer of Ofterdingen,** *has signed a pact with the devil!* If you have never heard Christine sing the final trio of *Faust* you do not know *Faust*: for exaltation of voice and the sacred rapture of a pure heart, it will never be bettered!'

But some subscribers protested. Why had such a pearl been kept hidden from them for so long? Until then, Christine Daaé had been adequate singing Siebel* to the Marguerite of the emphatically voluptuous Carlotta. It had taken the unexplained and inexplicable absence of Carlotta from the gala concert for Mlle Daaé, at short notice, to have her chance, to rise to the occasion and show what she could do in a part of the programme featuring the Spanish diva! Finally, what had made Messrs Debienne and Poligny think of Christine Daaé? Did it mean they had known about her great, hidden talent all along? And if they had, why had they kept it hidden? Oddly, she didn't have a singing teacher at the time. Several times she had said that henceforth she would manage without one. It was all very puzzling.

The Count de Chagny had been present in his box and had jumped to his feet and joined in the barrage of bravos.

Philippe-Georges-Marie, Count de Chagny, was then exactly forty-one years of age. He was a great noble and a fine-looking man. He was of above average height, had an agreeable face though his brow was heavy and his eyes were cold. He always behaved with exquisite courtesy to the ladies and was rather aloof with men who were not always inclined to forgive his worldly success. He was considerate and had a conscience. By the death of old Count Philibert, he had become head of one of the oldest and most illustrious families in France. Its aristocratic pedigree dated from the time of Louis le Hutin.* The Chagny fortune was enormous. When the old Count, a widower, died, it was no small burden that fell on Philippe's shoulders: that of managing the inheritance. His two sisters and his brother Raoul wanted to be no part of it and refused to allow the estate to be divided. They left everything to Philippe, as if the right of the firstborn to inherit had never been abolished.* When both sisters married—on the same day—they were given their shares by their brother, not as something that was theirs by right but as a dowry for which they were suitably grateful.

The Countess de Chagny—née de Moerogis de La Martynière—had died giving birth to Raoul who was born twenty years after his older brother. When the old Count died, Raoul was twelve. Philippe took an active interest in his education. In this task he was admirably seconded at first by his two sisters and then by an old aunt, the widow of a naval officer, who lived at Brest and gave young Raoul a taste for the sea. The young man went to the *Borda** from which he emerged near the top of his class and duly completed his training by sailing round the world. Thanks to powerful contacts, he had just been selected to take part in the official expedition of the *Requin* which was being sent to the North Pole to look for survivors of the *Artois* expedition from which nothing had been heard for three years.* Meantime, he was to make the most of a long leave which still had six months to run. In aristocratic circles, all the dowager ladies noticed this handsome young man and pitied him in advance for the hardships which lay in store.

He was exceptionally diffident, I'm almost tempted to say innocent. He seemed to have only just emerged from the influence of women. Indeed, cosseted by two sisters and his old aunt, his almost exclusively female upbringing had made him open and honest and given him a boyish charm none of which had yet rubbed off. At that point, he had just reached the age of twenty-one but looked eighteen. He had a small, blond moustache, fine blue eyes and a girlish complexion.

Philippe spoiled Raoul. In the first place, he was very proud of his younger brother and happily predicted a great future for him in the navy in which one of their forebears, the celebrated Chagny de La Roche, had held the rank of Admiral. He used Raoul's leave to show him the sights of Paris, because Raoul knew almost nothing about what the capital had to offer in the way of fine living and artistic pleasures.

The Count took the view that at Raoul's age, being a goody-goody wasn't altogether *a good thing*. He himself was level-headed, took his pleasures as soberly as he approached his work, always behaved impeccably, and was incapable of setting his brother a bad example. He took him everywhere, even to the foyer of the corps de ballet. I know of course that people said the Count was 'very close' to La Sorelli. But surely no one would criticize a gentleman who was single and therefore had lots of leisure time on his hands, especially now that his sisters had been suitably provided for, and begrudge him the right to spend a few hours, after dinner, in the company of a dancer who might not be particularly clever but had the prettiest eyes imaginable? Besides, there are places where a true Parisian, when he holds the rank of Count de Chagny, must be seen, and in those days the foyer of the corps de ballet was one of them.*

But maybe Philippe would not have taken his brother backstage at the National Academy of Music if Raoul had not been first, and more than once, to suggest it with a gentle insistence which the Count would subsequently remember.

The night of the concert, after cheering Christine Daaé, Philippe had turned to Raoul and was shocked to see how pale he looked.

'Can't you see?' Raoul had said. 'She's been taken ill!'

It was true. On stage, Christine had to be supported.

'You're the one who looks as if you're about to faint,' said the Count, turning to Raoul. 'What's wrong with you?'

But Raoul was already on his feet.

'Come on,' he said. His voice shook.

'Where are you going, Raoul?' said the Count, surprised by the emotion that had gripped his brother.

'Let's go and see what the matter is! She's never sung like that before!'

The Count stared at his brother and then his mouth relaxed into a faint, amused smile.

'Very well,' he said, adding: 'Come on then!'

He looked delighted.

Moments later they were at the entrance reserved for the season-ticket holders. It was crammed. As he waited to get through to the stage, Raoul absently worried at his gloves. Philippe, who had a kind heart, did not make jokes about his impatience. But now he *knew*. He knew why Raoul's mind seemed elsewhere whenever he spoke to him and also why he seemed so keen to bring every topic of conversation back to the Opera.

They stepped on to the stage.

A crush of men in evening dress pushed their way towards the foyer of the corps de ballet or made for the performers' dressing rooms. The shouts of the scene-shifters mingled with the orders barked by their gaffers. The hustle and bustle of the stage between acts—extras from the end-of-half finale troop off, small-part dancers barge past you, a flat is moved, a backcloth descends from the flies, a scenery door is hammered into shape, the never-ending 'mind your backs!' rings in your ears bringing an imminent threat of disaster to your topper or a solid dig in the small of the back—it's uproar and it never fails to disconcert novices like the man with the small, blond moustache, blue eyes and girlish complexion as he fought his way as fast as he could through the traffic jam and across the stage on which Christine Daaé had just scored a triumph and beneath which Joseph Buquet had just died.

That night, the chaos had never been so complete, but Raoul had never been less shy. Using his solid shoulder, he brushed aside anybody and anything that got in his way, paying no attention to the comments people made around him, and not even trying to understand what the flustered stagehands were saying. All he wanted was to see the woman whose magical voice had pierced his heart. Yes, he had the feeling that his poor, untried heart no longer belonged to him. He had tried, truly he had, to keep up his defences from the first moment Christine, whom he had known since she was a little girl, had come back into his life. In her presence he had felt sweet emotions which he had thought about and tried to chase away, for his self-respect and his religious upbringing had made him swear to love no woman except the one who would become his wife, and naturally there was no question that he should ever think of marrying a singer. But then those sweet emotions had been followed by a terrible sensation. Was it a sensation or was it a feeling? It was half physical, half emotion. He had an ache in his chest, as though someone had cut it open and removed his heart. It felt hollow, as if it were an empty space which could never be filled except by another heart. These are psychological symptoms of a particular kind which are said to be comprehensible only to those who have been similarly smitten and been struck by that strange lightning bolt called in common parlance: love at first sight.

Count Philippe had difficulty keeping up with him. The smile was still on his face.

Backstage, as Raoul walked through the double-door which opens on to both the stairs that lead to the foyer and the steps to the orchestra boxes on the left of the stage, he was forced to give way to a covey of small-part dancers who had just swooped down from their dressing room high in the attics and were blocking his path. Saucy remarks were directed at him by painted mouths, but he paid no attention. Eventually, he was able to go on his way and proceeded down a dark corridor which rang with the cries of enthusiastic admirers. One name rose above all the rest: Daaé! Daaé! The Count, who had now caught up, muttered: 'The young devil! He knows the way!' and wondered how he'd managed it. He'd never taken Raoul to see Christine in her dressing room. So presumably he'd been there by himself while the Count was in the foyer chatting as usual with La Sorelli. She often got him to stay by her side until the moment she made her entrance and sometimes she made him hold the little leggings she wore on her way down the stairs from her dressing room to make sure that her satin dancing shoes stayed shiny and her flesh-coloured tights did not get dirty. La Sorelli always had a good excuse: she had no mother to do it for her.

Temporarily putting off the time when he was due to see La Sorelli, the Count made his way down the gallery that led to Christine Daaé's dressing room. He'd never seen the corridor as full of people as it was on that evening when the whole theatre seemed as overwhelmed by the soprano's success as they were shocked by her collapse. Indeed, she had yet to come round. Meantime the house doctor, who had been sent for, now arrived, pushing his way through the crowd with Raoul hard on his heels.

The doctor and the lover reached Christine's side at the same moment, so that she was treated by the former and opened her eyes in the arms of the latter. The Count remained by the door with all the others.

'Doctor, don't you think it would be an idea if these gentlemen moved back and cleared the lady's dressing room?' asked Raoul, with surprising boldness. 'There's no air in here.'

'You are absolutely right,' agreed the doctor, and he shooed everyone away except for Raoul and the maid.

The maid stared at Raoul with an expression of total bewilderment. She had never set eyes on him before.

But she did not dare ask him who he was and what he was doing there.

The doctor simply assumed that if the young man behaved the way he did it was because he was perfectly entitled to. And so Raoul was able to stay on in Christine's dressing room and watch her regain consciousness while the two directors, Messrs Debienne and Poligny, who had come to offer their congratulations, were kept waiting outside in the corridor with the rest of the gentlemen in evening clothes. The Count de Chagny, who had been banished to the corridor with the rest, laughed uproariously.

'Of all the cunning… The foxy devil!' he said, adding in an undertone: 'You can't trust these callow youths who come over all innocent any further than you can throw'em!'

He beamed and delivered his verdict: 'He's a true Chagny!' and headed off towards La Sorelli's dressing room. But at that moment the ballerina was leading her trembling flock down the stairs. It was then that the Count met her on his way up, as we already know.

Meanwhile, in her dressing room, Christine Daaé gave a deep sigh which was immediately answered by a soft moan. She turned her head, saw Raoul and started. She looked at the doctor and smiled at him, then at her maid and then at Raoul again.

'Oh!' she said to him in a voice that was little more than a whisper, 'who are you?'

'I, Mademoiselle,' answered Raoul putting one knee on the floor and dropping an ardent kiss on the diva's hand, '*I am the little boy who once ran into the sea to rescue your scarf*.'

Christine looked at the doctor and again at her maid and all three burst out laughing. Raoul stood up, blushing.

'Since you seem set on not recognizing me, I would like to say something to you in private. It's very important.'

'Perhaps when I'm feeling a little better, if that's all right with you,' she said in a voice that shook. 'You are very kind.'

'But you must go now,' added the doctor with his most twinkling smile. 'Leave me to look after the patient.'

'I'm not ill,' Christine broke in suddenly with a vivacity as strange as it was unexpected.

And with a rapid movement of one hand over her eyes, she got to her feet.

'Thank you, doctor… I would like to be alone… I want you all to go away, please… Leave me… I'm feeling very tense this evening.'

The doctor tried to object for a moment but given the patient's agitated mood he reckoned the best treatment for her state was not to cross her. He left with Raoul who, outside in the corridor, felt very much at a loss.

'I hardly recognized her tonight…' said the doctor, 'she's normally such a sweet-tempered young woman…'

And off he went, leaving Raoul alone in a part of the theatre which was now completely deserted.

By now, everyone should be making their way to the leaving ceremony in the foyer of the corps de ballet. Raoul thought that perhaps La Daaé would be going too, so he waited in the empty, silent corridor. He backed into the shadow of a convenient doorway. He could still feel that aching emptiness where his heart should have been. That was what he wanted to talk to La Daaé about, urgently. Suddenly her dressing-room door opened and he saw the maid emerge alone with a number of bundles. He stopped her as she passed and asked for news of her mistress. She laughed and said her mistress was quite well, thank you, but she wasn't to be disturbed because she wanted to be left on her own. Then she ran off. An idea flashed into Raoul's fevered brain. It was obvious: La Daaé wanted to be alone *for him!* Hadn't he said he particularly wanted a word in private and didn't that explain why she'd ordered everybody away? Hardly daring to breathe, he crept towards her dressing room, put one ear against the door so that he would hear her reply and was about to knock… But he let his hand fall. He had just made out, inside the room, *the voice of a man*, a commanding voice, and it was saying:

'Christine, you must love me!'

Then Christine's pained voice—you could hear the tears in it—said tremblingly:

'How can you say that? *I sing only for you!*'

Cut to the quick, Raoul leaned against the door panel for support. His heart, which he'd thought was gone for good, was suddenly back in his chest and beating loudly in his ears. The whole corridor pulsated with it and his ears were almost deafened by the sound. If his heart went on making such a racket surely someone would hear, open the door and he would be ignominiously sent packing. How mortifying for a Chagny! Caught listening at keyholes! He squeezed his chest with both hands to silence his heart. But a heart isn't the same as the jaws of a dog, though even when you've got a dog's jaws in both hands—a dog that just won't stop barking—you can still hear it growling.

The man's voice resumed:

'You must be exhausted.'

'Tonight I gave you my soul and I am dead.'

'You have a beautiful soul, my dear,' went on the deep voice, 'and I thank you for it. No emperor was ever given so great a gift! *Tonight the angels wept!*'

After those words: *Tonight the angels wept!* Raoul heard no more.

But he did not leave. Instead, as if he feared detection, he went back to his shadowy doorway determined to stay there until the man left Christine's dressing room. In a single moment he had just learned the meaning of both love and hate. He knew he was in love. He now wanted to know who he hated. To his astonishment, the door opened and Christine appeared, wrapped in furs and her face hidden by a veil. She was alone. She closed the door behind her but Raoul observed that she did not lock it. She walked past him. He did not watch her go but kept his eyes fixed on the door which stayed shut. When the corridor was empty once more, he moved down it. He opened the dressing-room door and closed it behind him. He found himself in total darkness. The gaslight had been extinguished.

'I know you're in here,' said Raoul resolutely. 'Why are you hiding?'

He spoke the words keeping his back pressed hard against the door.

Darkness and silence. All Raoul could hear was the sound of his own breathing. He was quite oblivious of the fact that his behaviour was far more reckless than anyone would believe possible.

'You will leave here only when I say so!' he cried. 'If you don't answer, then you are a coward! But I'll see your face!'

And he struck a match. The flame illuminated the room. There was no one there! Taking good care to lock the door, he lit the gaslights and the oil lamps. He looked in the inside closet, opened cupboards, searched everywhere, felt the walls with clammy hands. He found nothing!

'It can't be!' he said aloud, 'am I going out of my mind?'

He stayed as he was for ten minutes, listening to the hissing of the gas in the quiet of the deserted dressing room. He was in love, yet it never occurred to him to purloin a ribbon which would enable him to take the fragrance of the woman he loved away with him. Finally he left, not knowing what he was doing or where he was going. There came a point in his mindless wandering when he felt an icy blast strike his face. He was at the bottom of a narrow staircase. Behind him a number of workmen were struggling down the stairs carrying a stretcher of sorts covered with a white sheet.

'Could you tell me which is the way out, please?' he said to one of the men.

'Just there, squire! Across the way from where you are,' was the answer. 'The door's open. But make way now…'

Gesturing towards the stretcher, Raoul asked without thinking:

'What have you got there?'

'That there', the workman replied, 'is Joseph Buquet. He was found hanging by his neck three levels down, between a flat and a backdrop from *Le Roi de Lahore*.'

Raoul stepped back to make way for the procession, nodded his respects and left.

03

In which Messrs Debienne and Poligny, for the first time, secretly make the Opera's new Directors, Messrs Armand Moncharmin and Firmin Richard, party to their real, hidden reason for resigning from the National Academy of Music

MEANTIME, the farewell ceremony was under way.

As I have explained, the evening's magnificent concert had been arranged by Messrs Debienne and Poligny to mark their departure from the Opera. They wanted what we would now call a 'first-class send-off'.

In choosing the ideal valedictory programme they had been advised by everybody who was someone in the world of society and the arts who had now foregathered in the foyer of the corps de ballet. La Sorelli, a glass of champagne in her hand and the little speech she had prepared on the tip of her tongue, was waiting for the outgoing Directors to arrive. Behind her, the senior and junior girls of the corps de ballet were huddled in a group, some talking in whispers about the day's events and the rest winking and waving covertly to their friends who had begun to congregate in a chattering crowd around the buffet supper which had been set up on the sloping floor between the *War Dance* and the *Country Dance*, both by M. Boulanger.*

A few of the dancers had already changed into their everyday clothes, most were still wearing their gauzy net skirts, but all had decided they should behave in a manner suitable to the occasion. Only little Jammes, full of her fifteen carefree summers—Oh happy days!—seemed to have forgotten all about the ghost and the death of Joseph Buquet and went on prattling, chattering, fidgeting and playing the fool to such a degree that when Messrs Debienne and Poligny finally appeared on the foyer steps, she was told to behave herself in no uncertain terms by La Sorelli who finally lost patience.

Everyone noticed how cheerful the outgoing Directors looked. Now, in the provinces, this would have seemed not at all appropriate. But in Paris it was considered to be in the best possible taste. No one can become properly Parisian until he or she has learned to put a happy face on their troubles and erect a façade of misery, worry and indifference to mask inner happiness. If you know that one of your friends has problems, don't try to comfort him, he'll only tell you there's no need. But if something good happens to him, never congratulate him; he is so convinced his good luck is his due that he's surprised anyone should bother even to mention it. Paris is one huge masked ball and people as much 'in the swim' as Messrs Debienne and Poligny were not likely to choose the foyer of the corps de ballet to display their worries which were real enough. They were already grinning far too broadly at La Sorelli who had just begun her little speech when a cry from that minx, the irrepressible Jammes, wiped the smiles off the faces of both Directors so suddenly that the utter dismay and panic which they concealed were brutally exposed for all to see:

'The Ghost!'

Jammes had spoken the words in a tone of unutterable horror. Her finger pointed into the crowd of men in evening clothes and picked out a face so pale, so grim, so repulsive, with black holes set so deeply in the hollow eye sockets, that what looked like a death's head became an instant, overwhelming success.

'It's the Ghost! *The Phantom of the Opera!*'

Everyone in the jostling crowd laughed and wanted to offer the Phantom of the Opera a well-earned drink, but he had vanished! He had melted into the crowd and could not be found. Meanwhile, two elderly gentlemen tried to calm Jammes down and Meg Giry screeched like a peacock.

La Sorelli was livid: she had not been allowed to finish her speech. M. Debienne and M. Poligny had kissed her, thanked her and disappeared as fast as the Phantom had done. This came as no surprise, since everyone knew that the pair were going to be subjected to a similar ceremony in the Chorus Room, on the next floor up. Only when that ordeal was over could they welcome their inner circle of friends into the antechamber of the Directors' suite where a decent supper awaited them.

There is where we now catch up with them, along with the new team of Messrs Armand Moncharmin and Firmin Richard. The outgoing Directors barely knew their successors, but they put on a great show of friendship which was returned with interest. As a result, guests who had feared they were in for a dull evening began to look much happier. The supper livened up considerably and when the time came for toasts, the junior government minister acquitted himself so deftly, linking the great glories of the past with the great successes to come, that a mood of great conviviality settled on the whole gathering. The actual handing over of directorial powers had taken place informally the previous evening and all outstanding matters between the old Directors and the new had been settled by the junior minister with such good will on all sides that no one present on that memorable occasion had any reason to be surprised to find broad smiles on the faces of all four Directors.

Messrs Debienne and Poligny had already given the two tiny keys to Messrs Armand Moncharmin and Firmin Richard. They were master-keys and they opened all the doors in the National Academy of Music—several thousand in all.* Everyone was curious to see them and they were being handed round when the attention of a number of guests was diverted to something they had just seen. At the end of the table was the same pale, phantasmagorical face with sunken eyes which had appeared in the foyer of the corps de ballet where it had been greeted by Jammes's cry: 'The Phantom of the Opera!'

He was sitting there just like any other guest, but with this difference: he ate and drank nothing.

Those who had begun looking and had smiled at what they saw soon turned away, for the sight immediately filled the mind with very disturbing thoughts. No one repeated the banter heard in the foyer, no one said: 'It's the Phantom of the Opera!'

He had not uttered a word and those sitting next to him could not have said at what precise moment he had materialized there, but everyone thought that if the dead ever return and sit at the table of the living, none of them would ever have a more macabre face. The friends of Armand Moncharmin and Firmin Richard assumed that the emaciated guest was an acquaintance of Debienne and Poligny, while the friends of Debienne and Poligny thought the corpse must be there at the invitation of Richard and Moncharmin. Thus no one asked questions, there were no unpleasant comments or jokes in poor taste: nothing was said that might ruffle the feathers of the guest from the lower depths. One or two guests who knew the legend of the Phantom of the Opera and had heard the description of the spectre the chief stage-setter had given—they didn't know that Joseph Buquet was actually dead—were inwardly convinced that the man at the end of the table could easily pass as the living embodiment of the figment, as they thought, of the irredeemably superstitious imaginations of the Opera House staff. According to the legend, the Phantom had no nose; but the mysterious figure most certainly had one, though in his *Memoirs* M. Moncharmin says the guest's nose was transparent. 'His nose', he says, 'was long, thin and transparent'—but I myself would say that the nose could have been false. Perhaps what M. Moncharmin thought was transparency was a trick of the light. It is known for a fact nowadays that technology can create very convincing false noses for those who have lost them as a result of an accident or following some medical procedure. Did the Phantom really come that evening and sit at the Directors' banquet without being invited? And can we be sure that the apparition was really the Phantom of the Opera? Who can say? If I bring up this incident, it is not because I want for a moment to believe or try to persuade the reader to believe that the Phantom was capable of such brass-necked effrontery, but because it is a distinct possibility.

And there appears to be some reason for believing that such in fact was the case. M. Armand Moncharmin also says this in his *Memoirs*, and I quote Chapter XI: 'When I think back to that first evening, I can't separate what we were told in confidence by Messrs Debienne and Poligny in their office and the presence at our supper party of a *phantomatic figure* that none of us knew.'

This is exactly what happened next:

Messrs Debienne and Poligny were sitting halfway along the table. They did not notice the man with the death's head until he suddenly began to speak.

'The girls of the corps de ballet are right,' he said. 'The death of poor Buquet was perhaps not as natural as people think.'

Debienne and Poligny gave a start.

'Buquet dead?' they cried.

'Yes,' answered the man—or the spectre of a man—coolly. 'He was found hanging earlier this evening, three levels down, between a flat and part of the scenery from *Le Roi de Lahore*.'

Both Directors, or rather ex-Directors, stood up together and stared at the speaker in a very strange way. They looked unreasonably shaken, by which I mean more shaken than was reasonable for men in their lofty position who had just been told that a minion, a mere stage-setter, had been found hanging by the neck. They looked at each other, their faces whiter than the tablecloth. In the end, Debienne gestured to Moncharmin and Richard, Poligny offered a brief apology to the guests and all four disappeared into the offices of the Director. I shall now let M. Moncharmin take up the story:

'Messrs Debienne and Poligny became increasingly agitated,' he recalls in his *Memoirs*, 'and we sensed they had something to tell us but did not know where to begin. They began by asking if we knew the man at the end of the table who had announced that Joseph Buquet was dead. When we said no, they looked even more worried. They took the two master-keys from us, stared at them for a moment, nodded and then advised us to have new locks fitted in the greatest secrecy to the doors of all apartments, offices and rooms which we wanted made hermetically secure. They looked so droll as they said this that we started laughing and asked if there were thieves roaming around the Opera. They said there was something worse: the *Phantom*. We started laughing again, convinced that they were playing some sort of practical joke on us which would be the climax of their little supper party. Then, at their behest, resuming our serious faces, we decided to enter into the spirit of the thing, to humour them. They said they would never have brought up the matter of the ghost if they hadn't been formally ordered by the Phantom himself to make us promise to respect his wishes and give him whatever he asked for. But only too glad to get out of a building ruled by the master-hand of a tyrannical spectre and thus to be shot of him, they had hesitated until the very last moment to tell us of strange occurrences for which our sceptical minds were unprepared. But the public announcement of the death of Joseph Buquet had been a brutal reminder that whenever they had disobeyed the Phantom's orders in the past, some curious or fatal event had revealed the extent of their powerlessness.

'While their unexpected words were being urged on us in the lowest, most secret of confidential whispers, I glanced across at Richard. Now, when Richard was a student, he had a reputation as a hoaxer, that is, he knew every last way of playing practical jokes on people, as the concierges of the Boulevard Saint-Michel knew to their cost. So he seemed to be very much enjoying the dish that that was now in turn being served up for him. He did not miss a morsel even though the seasoning, in view of Buquet's death, was a touch macabre. He nodded his head sadly, varying the expressions on his face as the other two spoke, and looked distraught as a man might who bitterly regretted his part taking on the management of an Opera House now that he'd discovered it came with a built-in ghost. I could find no better response than to imitate his despairing reactions slavishly. But, for all our efforts to play the game, in the end we could not help bursting out laughing in the faces of Messrs Debienne and Poligny who, seeing us move from the gloomiest state of mind to the most outrageous good humour, behaved exactly as if they thought we were mad.

'Feeling the joke was going on rather too long, Richard asked half jokingly: "But what does this Phantom fellow actually want?"

'M. Poligny crossed to his desk and came back with a paper containing a memorandum of articles and conditions. The document began with these words:

> '"The Management of the Opera shall invest all productions staged by the National Academy of Music with all due magnificence, as befits France's leading Opera House"

'—and ended with clause 98, which read as follows:

> '"The present contract of appointment may be rescinded
>
> 1. If the Director (or Directors) contravenes the provisions laid down in this statement of conditions."

'These conditions were then set out.

'This copy of the document', says M. Moncharmin, 'was written in black ink and was identical to ours.

'However, we observed that in the document shown us by M. Poligny a supplementary condition had been added at the end, in red ink. The writing was strange and spiky, as if it had been done with the tips of unused matchsticks. It was like that of a child who has difficulty holding its pen and has not learned how to join the letters. This extra paragraph, which so bizarrely extended clause 98, ran as follows:

> '"*5. Should the Director (or Directors) fall more than two weeks late with the monthly payment due to the Phantom of the Opera, which is fixed until further notice at 20,000 francs per month, or 240,000 francs per annum.*"

'M. Poligny held out an uncertain finger and pointed to this final clause which we had most certainly not been expecting.

'"Is that all? *He* doesn't require anything else?" asked Richard as cool as could be.

'"Er, yes he does, actually," replied Poligny.

'And he riffled through the memorandum again and read it out:

> '"Clause 63. The grand-tier box numbered ONE, to the right of the stage, shall be reserved at all performancs for the Head of State.
>
> '"Ground-floor Box 20 on Mondays, and grand-tier Box 30 on Wednesdays and Fridays shall be placed at the disposal of the Prime Minister.
>
> '"Second-tier Box 27 shall be reserved every day for the exclusive use of the Prefect of the Seine *département* and the Paris Commissioner of Police."

'M. Poligny showed us where another line had been added, again in red ink, at the end of this clause:

> '"*Grand-tier Box 5 shall be made available, at all performances, for the exclusive use of the Phantom of the Opera.*"

'At this point all we could do was to rise, shake the hands of our two predecessors warmly and congratulate them on coming up with such a splendid leg- pull. It showed that the traditional French sense of fun was not dead. Richard went so far as to add that he now understood why Messrs Debienne and Poligny were retiring as Directors of the National Academy of Music: it would be impossible to run the place with a house Phantom that made such demands.

'"Quite," said M. Poligny without batting an eyelid. "You don't find two hundred and forty thousand francs that easily. And have you considered the loss incurred in not selling tickets for grandtier Box 5 which has to be reserved at each and every performance for the exclusive use of the Phantom? And that excludes reimbursing the season-ticket holder? It's appalling! Really, we're not in this business to keep ghosts in a style to which they become accustomed! So we decided to go!"

'"Absolutely," echoed M. Debienne, "we decided to go! So let's do it!"

'He got to his feet.

'Richard said: "I can't help thinking that you've been handling this Phantom with kid gloves. If I had to deal with a Phantom as troublesome as yours, I wouldn't hesitate to have him arrested…"

'"And just where and how would you do that?" they said with one voice. "We've never seen him!" "Not even when he's in his box?"

'"*We've never seen him in his box!*"

'"Then why don't you sell tickets for it?"

'"What? Sell tickets for the Phantom's box? You just try it, gentlemen!"

'Whereupon all four of us left the Director's office. Richard and I had never laughed as much.'

04
Box 5

ARMAND MONCHARMIN wrote such voluminous memoirs that we are perfectly entitled to ask how, especially during his lengthy term as co-Director of the Opera, he ever found time to do anything towards running the place beyond setting down everything that went on there. He knew nothing about music, but he was on first-name terms with the Minister of Education and Arts, had been a society journalist and enjoyed a large private income. Still, he was a very engaging man and not unintelligent because, having made up his mind to take the reins of the Opera, he knew exactly who he wanted to do the donkey work. Which was why he went straight to Firmin Richard…

Firmin Richard was a distinguished musician and a gentleman. I reproduce the profile of him published by the *Revue des théâtres* at the time when he took up his duties:

> 'M. Firmin Richard, 51, is tall, solidly but not stoutly built. He has presence, an air of distinction, a ruddy face and thick, close-cropped hair growing low on his forehead and a beard to match. There is a slightly melancholy cast to his features but this is promptly tempered by the candid, honest look in his eye and a delightful smile.
>
> 'He is a most distinguished musician. Skilled in harmony, knowledgeable in counterpoint, the hallmark of his compositions is a sense of spacious grandeur. He has published chamber music which is highly thought of by devotees of the genre, a quantity of piano music—sonatas and highly original occasional pieces—plus a set of songs without words. Most notably, *The Death of Hercules*, performed in concerts given at the Conservatoire,* has an epic quality to it which recalls Gluck, one of Maestro Firmin Richard's revered masters. However, though he likes Gluck, that does not mean he dislikes Piccini: his tastes are catholic. He is full of admiration for Piccini, he doffs his cap to Meyerbeer, delights in Cimarosa and is second to none in his appreciation of the inimitable genius of Weber. As to Wagner, M. Richard claims that he was the first, and perhaps remains the only person in France to have understood him…'*

I will spare the reader the rest, for it must be pretty clear from it that if M. Richard liked every kind of music and all sorts of musicians, it was the duty of all musicians to like M. Firmin Richard. Let us conclude by saying according to the thumbnail sketch he was what is commonly called an autocrat, which is to say that he was not a very pleasant man.

The first few days the twin Directors spent at the Opera were dominated by the euphoria of being newly installed as masters of a fine, colossal undertaking. They had forgotten all about the strange, outlandish tale of the ghost when an incident occurred which showed them that if there was a hoax, it was far from played out.

One morning M. Richard arrived at his office at eleven o'clock. His secretary, M. Rémy, brought him half-a-dozen letters which he hadn't opened because they were marked 'personal'. One of them immediately caught M. Richard's eye, not only because the address on the envelope was written in red ink but also because he thought he had seen the handwriting before. He did not have to think for long: it was the same red writing which had added a condition to the memorandum of appointment. He recognized the spiky pen-strokes and childish hand. He broke the seal and began to read:

> '*Dear Director*,
>
> '*I apologize for taking up your valuable time just now when you are busy deciding the fate of the Opera's greatest artists, renewing important contracts and drafting new ones, all with a breadth of vision, an understanding of the theatre, a knowledge of the public and its tastes, and an unquestionable authority which, speaking as one with long experience of these matters, I find quite astonishing. I know what you have decided for La Carlotta, La Sorelli and the Jammes girl, and for one or two others in whom you have seen admirable signs of promise, of talent or genius. (You will surely know who I have in mind when I use those words; obviously not Carlotta who can't sing to save her life and who should never have left Les Ambassadeurs or the Café Jacques;** nor La Sorelli who owes her success mostly to the way she's built; nor the Jammes girl who dances like a cow in a field; nor Christine Daaé, who has genius but is assiduously sidelined and denied the chance of creating a role in an important new production.) Still, you are free to manage your little affairs as you think best, are you not?*
>
> '*However, before you get round to showing Christine Daaé the door, I would like to hear her sing Siebel, given that she has not been offered the role of Marguerite despite her great success last week. I would be obliged if you did not allow my box to be used today* nor the next few days; *for I will not end this letter without mentioning how surprised I was the other day when I came to the Opera only to be informed that* you had left instructions, *at the ticket office, that tickets for my box had been sold.*
>
> '*I have not taken the matter further first because I hate scandal, secondly because I imagined your predecessors, Messrs Debienne and Poligny, who always treated me with consideration, had probably forgotten to mention my little eccentricities to you before they left. However, I have just received their answer to my request for an explanation from which it is clear that you knew all about* my memorandum of articles and conditions *and that consequently you have been treating me with outrageous contempt.* If you want relations between us to be cordial, don't start by evicting me from my box!
>
> '*With these minor cavils, I remain, sir, yours etc.*
>
> '*Signed:* P. of the Opera.'

This letter was accompanied by a cutting from the *Revue théâtrale* which carried these words: '*P. of the O.: R. and M. have behaved unforgivably. We explained the situation and made sure they received a copy of your memorandum of conditions. Respects.*'

M. Richard was still reading when his office door opened and Armand Moncharmin walked in holding a letter identical to the one he had received. They looked at each other then burst out laughing.

'They're still plodding on with the same joke,' said M. Richard, 'but it's stopped being funny.'

'What does it mean?' asked M. Moncharmin. 'Do they think that just because they used to be Directors of the Opera we're going to offer them a free box for life?'

They had absolutely no doubt that the letter sent to both of them was the joint effort of their predecessors' warped sense of humour.

'I'm in no mood to be played for a fool any more!' growled Firmin Richard.

'There's no harm in it!' said M. Moncharmin.

'I'll tell you what they're after! A box for tonight!'

M. Richard told his secretary to send tickets for Box 5 to Messrs Debienne and Poligny if it hadn't been taken.

It hadn't. The tickets were sent off at once. M. Debienne lived on the corner of the Rue Scribe and the Boulevard des Capucines and M. Poligny in the Rue Auber. Both letters sent by the 'P. of the Opera' had been franked at the post office in the Boulevard des Capucines. It was Moncharmin who pointed this out as he examined the envelopes.

'There! I knew it!' said Richard.*

They shrugged and said they were sorry that two men old enough to know better like Debienne and Poligny were still playing childish games.

'Also, they could have been a bit more polite!' said Moncharmin. 'Did you notice how rude they were about the way we've dealt with La Carlotta, La Sorelli and the little Jammes girl?'

'Bah, they're just green with envy, old man!… And to think they went to the expense of sending that letter to the *Revue théâtrale*!… Haven't they got anything better to do?'

'Incidentally,' Moncharmin went on, 'they seem to be very interested in young Christine Daaé…'

'You know as well as I do that there's not a blot on her reputation!' replied Richard.

'A reputation can cover a multiplicity of sins,' said Moncharmin. 'Take me. I have a reputation for knowing all about music, but in fact I can't tell the difference between the bass and treble clefs!'

'Don't worry. No one's ever said that of you,' said Richard.

Then he sent for a porter and told him to let in the artists who had been pacing around the grand lobby of the administrative wing for a couple of hours, waiting for the door to the Directors' office to open. Behind it fame and fortune awaited them—or the axe.

The rest of the day was spent arguing, negotiating, signing or cancelling contracts. So you will readily believe that, come the evening—the evening of 25 January—both Directors, exhausted by a difficult day of angry confrontations, plotting, propositions, threats and protestations of love or hate, went to bed early, without being curious enough even to call in at Box 5 to see whether Messrs Debienne and Poligny were enjoying the performance. No one at the Opera had been idle since the old Directors had left, and M. Richard had gone ahead with urgent works without interrupting the programme of performances.

Next morning, Richard and Moncharmin each found, in their correspondence, a thank-you card from the Phantom:

'*Dear Director*,

'*Many thanks. Very pleasant evening. Daaé exquisite. Choruses need attention. La Carlotta, a great but characterless voice. Will be in touch soon regarding the 240,000 francs—to be precise, 233,424 francs and 70 centimes: Debienne and Poligny remitted the 6,575 francs 30 for the first two days of this year's payment. Their contracts ended on the 10th.*

'*Regards*

'P. of the O.'

In the same post was a note from Messrs Debienne and Poligny:

'*Gentlemen*,

'*Thank you for your kind gesture but you will understand that the prospect of listening to* Faust *again, though tempting to former Directors of the Opera House, can in no way make us forget that we have no right to occupy Box 5 on the grand tier. It is reserved exclusively for the person we discussed with you when we held our final reading of the Memorandum of Conditions, and especially of the last paragraph of Clause 63.*

'*We remain, etc.*'

'Hell's teeth, that pair of jokers are beginning to test my patience!' snarled Firmin Richard, snatching the letter from Debienne and Poligny.

That night, tickets were sold for Box 5.

When they arrived in their office the next morning, Richard and Moncharmin found the house security officer's report on an incident which had occurred the previous evening in Box 5 on the grand tier. This is the relevant section of the report. It is brief.

'Earlier this evening,' wrote the security officer, who had compiled his report the night before, 'I was forced to send for a constable to clear Box 5 on two separate occasions, once at the start and again in the middle of Act 2. The occupants, who arrived at the beginning of the second act, were causing a disturbance with their loud laughter and ribald comments. Patrons sitting nearby told them to hush and the whole audience was beginning to protest when the box-attendant came to fetch me. I went into the box in question and said what needed to be said. The patrons concerned did not seem to be in full control of themselves and responded by saying very stupid things. I warned them that if they made further trouble, I would be forced to clear the box. I was hardly through the door when I heard them laughing again and fresh protests from the house. I returned with a constable who ordered them to leave. Still laughing, they said they would not go unless they got their money back. Finally they calmed down and I allowed them to return to their box. They immediately started carrying on again and this time I had them ejected for good.'

'Send for the security man,' Richard told his secretary who had already read the report and marked passages in blue pencil.

Their secretary was M. Rémy, twenty-four years of age, thin moustache, elegant, dignified, in formal dress (in those days obligatory frock-coat during working hours), intelligent and intimidated by M. Richard, on a salary of 2,400 a year paid out of the Director's own pocket. His duties were to go through the daily papers, deal with letters, handle the allocation of boxes and complimentary tickets, fix appointments, chat pleasantly to those waiting to see the Director, visit artists who fell ill, find understudies, correspond with departmental managers, but above all he was the guardian of the Director's portal. He could be dismissed without compensation, sacked without notice, for he was not on the official payroll. M. Rémy, who had already sent for the house security officer, had him shown in.

He entered, looking rather nervous.

'Tell us what happened,' said Richard curtly.

The man began a stuttering account and referred to his report.

'But what on earth were those people laughing at?' asked Moncharmin.

'They'd probably had a good dinner, sir, and seemed more interested in larking about than listening to good music. I mean, they'd hardly set foot in the box when out they came shouting for the attendant. She asked what was up. They tell her: "Look, in the box, there's nobody inside, right?"—"Right," says the attendant.—"Well,' says they, "when we went in, we heard this voice telling us '*this box is taken*'."'

Moncharmin could not look at Richard without smiling, but Richard was not smiling. In his time, he had played enough practical jokes himself not to detect in the security officer's story which he told so artlessly the hallmark of one of those hoaxes which start by amusing and end by infuriating their targets.

To get on the right side of M. Moncharmin who was smiling, the man thought he should smile too. It was a bad mistake! He was immediately withered by a blistering glare from M. Richard, and immediately set about rearranging his face to show utter dismay.

'Let's be clear,' thundered the fearsome Richard. 'When these people arrived there was no one in the box? Correct?'

'Nobody, sir, nobody! Nobody in the box to the right of them, nobody in the box on the left, not a soul, I swear! It's the honest truth, sir! And it proves it was all some sort of stunt!'

‘And the attendant. What did she have to say?’

‘Oh, it was obvious to her. She reckoned it was the Phantom of the Opera! And that’s that!’

And the man sniggered. But quickly he realized sniggering was another mistake, for the words ‘she reckoned it was the *Phantom of the Opera*’ were hardly out of his mouth when M. Richard’s face which had been dark and grim suddenly turned furious.

‘Get me the attendant!’ he barked the order… ‘Now! Bring her to me here! And I want everybody else outside!’

The security officer tried to protest but Richard shut him up with a thunderous ‘Silence!’ Then just as the lips of the wretched man seemed closed for ever, the Director ordered him to open them again.

‘Who or what is this Phantom of the Opera?’ he finally brought himself to growl.

By this time the officer was incapable of speech. He managed to convey by a desperate dumb-show that he knew nothing and moreover didn’t want to know.

‘Have you seen the Phantom of the Opera?’

With a vigorous shake of the head, the man denied that he’d ever seen him.

‘Pity!’ snapped M. Richard frostily.

The man opened his eyes wide, so wide they seemed about to jump out of their sockets, and asked why the Director had uttered that ominous: ‘Pity!’

‘Because I’m going to send everyone who hasn’t seen him packing!’ said the Director. ‘Since he seems to be everywhere, it’s very odd that everybody keeps telling me they haven’t seen him anywhere. I like people who do their jobs conscientiously!’

HAVING said this, M. Richard paid no further attention to the security officer and proceeded to settle a number of business matters with his general Administrator who had just come into the office. The security man thought he could slip away quietly, very quietly, tremendously quietly, please God!… and, backing ever so quietly, had got as far as the door when M. Richard, noticing what he was up to, rooted him to the spot with an almighty bellow: 'Stay where you are!'

M. Rémy had sent for someone to fetch the box-attendant who also worked as concierge to a house in the Rue de Provence, just around the corner from the Opera. It was not long before she came.

'What's your name?'

'Madame Giry. But you know me, sir. I'm Meg Giry's mother, little Meg…'

This was said in a plain-spoken, sober voice which briefly took M. Richard aback for a moment. He stared at Mme Giry in her faded shawl, scuffed shoes, old taffeta dress and dusty-black bonnet. It was quite obvious from the way he looked at her that he neither knew nor recalled ever having heard of Mme Giry, nor Mlle Meg Giry, nor even little Meg! But so high did Mme Giry stand in her own regard as the famous box-attendant (I do believe it was her name that gave rise to the word 'giry' much used in backstage jargon. For example: when one singer or dancer tells another off for spreading gossip and tittle-tattle, she says 'that's all *giry-talk*'*) that, as we were saying, she thought everybody knew her.

'Never heard of you or her!' the Director said after a moment, 'but no matter, Mme Giry. I still want you to tell me what precisely happened last night to make you and the security man send for a constable.'

'Now that, sir, is exackly wot I was wanting to talk to you about, so's you won't have the same bother as happened to M. Debienne and M. Poligny… They didn't want to listen to me neither, at the start…'

'I'm not asking you about that. I'm asking you about what happened here last night!'

Mme Giry's face turned purple with indignation. No one had ever spoken to her like this before. She got up as if she were about to leave, gathering the folds of her skirt and making the feathers in her dusty-black hat quiver haughtily. Then changing her mind, she sat down again and said in a superior voice:

'What happened was that someone went and upset the Phantom!'

At this, seeing that Richard was about to lose his temper, Moncharmin intervened and took over questioning Mme Giry who, it turned out, found it perfectly natural that a disembodied voice should solemnly declare that there was someone in a box that was empty. She could not explain the phenomenon, which was not new to her, other than by attributing it to the Phantom. No one could see this Phantom in the box, but they'd all heard him. She'd often heard him, and they could take her word for it, because she never told fibs. They could ask M. Debienne and M. Poligny and anybody that knew her, also M. Isidore Saack who'd had a leg broken by the Phantom.

'Hold on,' broke in M. Moncharmin. 'The Phantom broke this Isidore Saack's leg?'

Mme Giry opened her eyes wide with amazement at such ignorance and in the end agreed to enlighten these two unfortunate innocents. The same thing had happened before, in the days when Messrs Debienne and Poligny were in charge, also in Box 5 and also during a performance of *Faust.*

Mme Giry coughed, cleared her throat and began. It was as if she was limbering up to sing the entire score of Gounod's opera.

'Well now, sir, that night, M. Maniera and his lady wife—they got a jeweller's shop in the Rue Mogador—were in the front of the box, and their good friend M. Isidore Saack was sitting behind Mme Maniera. Mephistopheles was singing (*she began to sing*): "Thou who feignest sleep". Just then M. Maniera hears in his right ear (his lady was on his left) a voice saying: "Aha! Julie's not pretending to be asleep" (his lady is called Julie). M. Maniera turns to his right to see who had said these words. Nobody there! He scratches his ear and wonders: "Am I dreaming?" Meanwhile Mephistopheles goes on with the next line of the aria… But perhaps I'm boring you gentlemen?'

'No no! Please go on!'

'Too kind I'm sure. (*Here Mme Giry simpers coyly.*) Anyroad, Mephistopheles carries on singing (*Mme Giry sings*): "Catherine, whom I adore… why deny me, I implore, a sweet and tender kiss?" and at that moment M. Maniera hears, again in his right ear, the same voice saying: "I don't think Julie would deny Isidore who doth implore a kiss!" He turns sharply, this time to the left, towards his lady and Isidore, and what does he see? Isidore behind him holding his lady's hand busily kissing it through the little opening near the button of her glove… like this, your honours. (*Mme Giry kisses the round place on her own hand left bare by her rough silk glove.*) As you can imagine, the next bit didn't happen on the Q.T.! Biff! Bang! M. Maniera was big and strong just like yourself, M. Richard, and he lands a couple of beauties on Isidore Saack who was soft and wishy-washy like M. Moncharmin here, if he don't mind me saying so. There was uproar in the auditorium. The audience was shouting: "That's enough! Stop!… He'll kill him!" In the end, M. Saack managed to get away.'

'So the Phantom didn't actually, personally break his leg?' asked M. Moncharmin, feeling rather put out that his physique had made such a poor impression on Mme Giry.

'Oh he broke it all right, sir,' replied Mme Giry sniffily, for she had understood the implication, 'bust it clean on the grand staircase, running down helter-skelter, he was! He come down them stairs that fast it'll be a month of Sundays before the poor man will go up them again!'

'And was it the Phantom who told you what he'd whispered in M. Maniera's right ear?' said prosecuting counsel Moncharmin, with a gravity he imagined was very droll.

'Oh no, sir! It was M. Maniera hisself. He…'

'But have you ever spoken to the ghost, my good woman?'

'Like I'm talking to you now, sir.'

'And when he talks to you, what does he say?'

'Well, he says I'm to fetch him a footstool!'

With these words, so solemnly delivered, Mme Giry's features turned to marble, the same yellowish, red-veined Pyrenean Sarrancolin marble used for the columns supporting the grand staircase.

This time, Richard burst out laughing again along with Moncharmin and Rémy, the secretary. Having learned by experience, the security officer took good care not to laugh. He leaned against the wall, nervously played with the keys in his pocket and wondered how it would all end. And the more irascible Mme Giry became, the more he was afraid M. Richard would lose his temper again. And now, confronted by the laughter of both Directors, Mme Giry was likely to turn nasty! Really nasty!

'Instead of laughing at the Phantom,' she cried indignantly, 'you'd be better off doing like M. Poligny. He found out hisself, the hard way, without any help!'

'Found out about what?' asked Moncharmin who had never enjoyed himself as much.

'About the Phantom, of course!… I'm telling you! Listen!… (*She calms down suddenly, aware of the gravity of the moment.*) *Listen!* I remember it as if it was yesterday. This time, they was performing *La Juive.** M. Poligny thought he'd watch it, by hisself, from the Phantom's box. Mme Krauss was getting an ovation. She'd just sung that aria in Act 2, you know (*Mme Giry hums*):

'When I'm near the man I love

I want to live and want to die
Yet though Death brush us with his glove
He shall not part us though we die.'

'Good! Good! I know it,' said Moncharmin with a discouraging smile.

But Mme Giry went on humming, while the feather in her dusty-black hat waved in time to:

'Away! Let's flee! Here below and in God's blue sky,
The same fate awaits us two unless we fly!'

'Yes, yes! We know the score too!' said Richard again, his patience tested once more, 'and then what? What happened next?'

'What happened was that at the very moment when Leopold says "Let's flee!" and Eléazar stops them saying: "Where do you go?" well, at exactly that moment M. Poligny who I was watching from the back of the box next door, which was empty, M. Poligny jumps up and walks out stiff as a poker. I just had time to ask him, like Eléazar on stage: "Where do you go?" But he didn't answer. He was pale as death. I watched him go down the great staircase, he didn't break a leg… but he was walking as if he was having a bad dream and didn't know where he was… and him that's paid to know the Opera House like the back of his hand!'

Thus spoke Mme Giry who then fell silent to gauge the effect she had produced. The Poligny incident made Moncharmin shake his head.

'None of that tells me in what circumstances and exactly how the Phantom of the Opera came to ask you for a footstool,' he said, looking Mme Giry straight, as they say, in the eye.

'That's when it started, that night… After that, they left the Phantom alone… They never tried to take his box off of him.

M. Debienne and M. Poligny gave orders it was to be kept for him at every performance. So, whenever he came, he'd ask me to get him his footstool…'

'Come now, a ghost asking for a footstool? May I deduce that this ghost is a woman?' asked Moncharmin.

'No, sir. The Phantom's a man.'

'How do you know?'

'He got a man's voice, a soft man's voice. This is what happens. When he comes to the Opera, he usually arrives halfway through the first act. He gives three little knocks on the door from inside Box 5. The first time I heard the knocks, I knew there wasn't nobody in there, so you can imagine how puzzled I was! I opens the door, I listen, I look: nobody there! And then blow me if I don't hear a voice speaking to me: "Mme Jules (that was my late husband's name) could I have a footstool, please?" Well I had the wind up, sir, if you'll pardon the expression… But the voice went on: "Don't be afraid, Mme Jules, I am the Phantom of the Opera!!!" I looked in the direction of where the voice was coming from, it was so kind and friendly that I was hardly frightened any more. The voice, sir, *was sitting in the first chair of the front row on the right.* Except for the fact I couldn't actually see anyone sitting there, you could have sworn that there was and that he was talking and was a well-mannered gentleman too.'

'Was the box on the right of Box 5 occupied?' asked Moncharmin.

'No there wasn't anybody in Box 7 yet, nor in Box 3 on the left. The performance had only just started.'

'And what did you do?'

'I brought him his footstool. Of course, it wasn't for himself that he wanted it but for his lady! But I never heard or saw anything of her…'

What? Really? The Phantom had suddenly acquired a wife? From Mme Giry the twin gaze of Messrs Moncharmin and Richard rose until it stopped at the security officer who was standing behind her and waving his arms trying to catch his employers' attention. He tapped his forehead with one grieving finger to indicate that Mme Jules was clearly off her head, a dumb-show which finally told M. Richard that it was time to part company from a security officer who thought fit to go on employing the services of a woman who saw things that weren't there. Meanwhile, she went on talking, full now of her Phantom, boasting about his generosity.

'After every performance, he always gives me a two-franc piece, sometimes it's five and even ten if he hasn't been for a few days. But since people have started bothering him again, he hasn't been giving me anything.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, my good woman… (*Another toss of the feather in her dusty-black hat was her response to such persistent familiarity*) truly sorry… But how does the Phantom actually give you the two francs?' asked Moncharmin, who was born inquisitive.

'He leaves it on the ledge of the parapet at the front of the box. I find it there with the programme I always get for him. Some nights, there's even flowers in there, maybe a rose off his lady's gown… oh yes! He must come with a lady sometimes, because one day they left a fan.'

'Really? The Phantom left a fan? What did you do with it?'

'I took it back to him the next time he came.'

At this point, the security man spoke up:

'You didn't follow correct procedure, Mme Giry. I'll have to fine you.'

'Shut up, you oaf!' (*This spoken in a whisper by M. Richard.*)

'So you returned the fan. What happened?'

'They took it away with them, sir. It wasn't there after the end of the performance and in its place they left me a box of English chocolates, the ones I like best, sir. Just typical of the Phantom's kindness.'

'That's all, Mme Giry… You may go.'

When Mme Giry had taken her leave of both Directors, which she did respectfully and not without a certain dignity which never deserted her, they informed the security officer that they had decided to dispense with the services of the mad old woman, then said he could leave.

When he had gone too, protesting his unfailing loyalty to the Opera House, the Directors instructed the Administrator to pay him off too. When at last they were alone, they each voiced a thought which had come to both simultaneously and independently, which was that they should take a closer look at Box 5.

We shall join them there presently.

05
The Magic Violin

Christine Daaé, a victim of machinations to which we shall return, did not subsequently repeat the spectacular success at the Opera that she had enjoyed on the famous night of the gala concert. She was later given an opportunity to sing at the home of the Duchess of Zurich where she performed the loveliest items in her repertoire. This is what the great critic X.Y.Z., who was among the guests of note, had to say about her:

> 'When one hears her sing in *Hamlet*, one wonders if Shakespeare himself had not come down from the fields of Elysium to direct her as *Ophelia!*… It is undeniable that when she puts on the crown of stars of the Queen of the Night, Mozart surely feels impelled to return from his eternal abode to hear her. But he need not go to the trouble, for the clear, thrilling voice of the magical performer of the *Magic Flute* rises up to him in the heights of the empyrean, which she scales with ease in precisely the same way that she effortlessly rose from her humble cottage in the village of Skotelof * to the palace of gold and marble that is M. Garnier's Opera House.'

But after the recital hosted by the Duchess of Zurich, she never sang at any more private concerts. She turned down all invitations and engagements. Giving no plausible reason, she withdrew from a charity gala at which she had previously promised to appear. She behaved as though she were no longer in control of her destiny, as if she feared a repeat of her triumph.

She learned that to please his brother, the Count de Chagny had been actively promoting her interests with M. Richard. She wrote to thank him but asked him not to speak up for her to the Directors any more. Why such curious behaviour? Some took it as a sign of overweening arrogance, others of angelic modesty. But no one who treads the boards can afford to be quite so modest. Indeed, I'm not sure if I shouldn't simply put her actions down to one word: fear. I truly believe Christine Daaé was frightened of what had happened to her and was as stunned as everyone else. Stunned? Surely not! But I have here a letter (from the Persian's private collection) which throws light on the events of that time. Having reread it, I will not write that Christine was either stunned by or frightened of her triumph, but *terrified* of it. Yes: *terrified!* 'I no longer know who I am when I sing!' she says.

Poor, pure, sweet Christine!

She never went out any more and the Viscount de Chagny failed in all his efforts to see her. He wrote to ask if he could call and had almost given up all hope of getting an answer when one day she sent him the following note:

> 'My dear Viscount,
>
> 'I have not forgotten the little boy who ran into the sea to rescue my scarf. I just had to write those words today when I leave for Perros* to discharge a sacred duty. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the death of my poor father. You knew him. He was fond of you. He is buried there, with his violin, in the cemetery of the little chapel under the hill where we used to play as children, next to the road where, when we were a little older, we said farewell for the last time.'

The moment he received Christine Daaé's letter, the Viscount de Chagny reached for the railway timetable, dressed quickly, wrote a brief note for his valet to give to his brother and jumped into a cab which deposited him on the platform of Montparnasse station just too late to catch the morning train on which he had been aiming for.

Raoul spent the rest of the day in wretched spirits which did not rise again until evening when he settled into his compartment on the train. All through the journey, he read Christine's note over and over, breathed in its perfume and relived sweet memories of his childhood. He spent a dreadful night in restless dreams which began and ended with Christine Daaé. Day was just breaking when he got off at Lannion. He hurried to the coach for Perros-Guirec. He was the only passenger. He questioned the driver who told him that the previous evening a young woman, who could well have come from Paris, had been driven to Perros and was staying at the Setting Sun Inn. It had to be Christine. And she was alone! Raoul gave a sigh of relief. Here in this lonely place, he'd be able to talk to her without interference. His love for her almost took his breath away. This fine young man, who had sailed around the world, was as innocent as the pure boy who had never strayed far from his mother's apron-strings.

As he drew closer to her, he fondly recalled the story of the little Swedish songbird. Many of the details are still not widely known.

Once upon a time, in a small town not far from Uppsala, a peasant lived with his family, tilling the land during the week and singing bass in the church choir on Sundays. The peasant had a small daughter and before she could even read her books he had taught her to read music. M. Daaé, though he may not have known it, was a great musician.* He played the violin and was regarded as the finest fiddler in the whole of Scandinavia. His reputation had spread far and wide and it was always to him that people turned for someone to get the couples dancing at weddings and other festive occasions. Mme Daaé was not strong and died when Christine had just turned five. The father, who only loved his daughter and music, sold his field and set off to find fame and fortune at Uppsala. All he found was grinding poverty.

So he returned to the country, travelling from fair to fair, scratching out his Scandinavian tunes, while his daughter, who never left his side, listened transfixed or sang while he played. One day at the fair at Ljimby, a certain Professor Valerius heard them and took them with him to Gothenburg. He reckoned the father was the most gifted fiddler in the world and that the daughter had the makings of a great singer. Provision was made for her upbringing and education. Wherever she went she amazed everyone with her pretty looks, grace and eagerness to speak the truth and do what is right. She made rapid progress. In the meantime, Professor Valerius and his wife were obliged to move to France. They brought Daaé and Christine with them. Mme Valerius treated Christine like her own daughter. But the father missed his homeland and he began to waste away. In Paris, he never went out. He lived in a dream which he nourished with his violin. He would shut himself away with his daughter for hours at a time, and they could be heard playing and singing softly, very softly. Sometimes, Mme Valerius would come and listen through the door. She would sigh, wipe a tear from her eye and come away on tiptoe, for she too was homesick for her wide Scandinavian skies.

M. Daaé grew stronger only in the summer, when the whole family went to spend the holidays at Perros-Guirec, in a part of Brittany known to very few Parisians. He loved the sea there. He said it was the same colour as it was back home. On the beach he would often play sad melodies and say the waves fell silent to listen. And he so badgered Mme Valerius that she at last gave in to a new whim of the former country fiddler.

In those days of Breton *pardons*, or processional pilgrimages, of village fêtes, country dances and other local festivals, he would set out as he used to, with his violin and his daughter, for a week at a time. They filled the smallest hamlets with enough music to last the whole year. They slept in barns, in preference to a room at an inn, snuggling up next to each other in the straw just as in the old days when they were so poor in Sweden.

They dressed respectably, refused the small coins that were offered them, and never begged. People could not understand such behaviour from a fiddler who raked the country roads with a pretty child who sang so sweetly that it was like listening to an angel from heaven. But they followed them from one village to the next.

One day, a little town boy who was out with his governess made her extend their walk, for he could not bear to stay far from the little girl whose sweet, pure voice had made him her slave. Followed by the boy, they came to an inlet the locals still call Trestraou. In those days, there was nothing there except the sky, the sea and golden sand. But that day there was a high wind and it blew Christine's scarf into the sea. She cried out and reached out for it with both arms, but the scarf was already floating on the water. Then she heard a voice:

'Don't worry,' it said, 'I'll go and get your scarf back from the sea!'

And she saw a small boy running, ignoring the warnings and indignant protests of a respectable lady dressed from head to foot in black. He sprinted straight into the sea fully clothed and brought her back her scarf. Both boy and scarf were wet through! The lady in black kept fussing but Christine laughed gaily and kissed the boy who was none other than the Viscount de Chagny. He was then on a visit to his aunt at Lannion. For the rest of that summer, they saw each other and played together almost every day. At his aunt's request and through the good offices of Professor Valerius, Daaé the fiddler agreed to give the young Viscount violin lessons. In this way, Raoul learned to love the melodies which had made Christine's childhood so magical.

They both had similar dreamy, placid natures. What they loved best were stories and old Breton legends, and their favourite game was knocking on doors, like beggars, collecting new ones. 'Sorry to bother you, Monsieur (or Madame), please do you have a story you could tell us?' It was the exception if they weren't offered one. Show me the old Breton grandmother who never at least once in her life saw elves and goblins dancing in the heather by moonlight!

But their greatest treat was at dusk, in the quiet of evening after the sun had set over the sea, when M. Daaé would sit next to them by the side of the road and tell them fantastic, comforting, terrifying tales of the North, whispering as if he was afraid to alarm the ghosts he raised. Some of his tales were as fine as those by Hans Andersen, others were like the stories told by the great poet Runeberg.* When he stopped, the children would cry: 'More! More!'

One story began this way:

'A king once sat in a little skiff on a still, deep lake like those which open like shining eyes among the mountains of Norway…

Another like this:

'Little Lotte's head was always full but was it full of nothing? She was a summer bird, gliding on golden sunbeams, her crown of flowers perched on her fair, curly hair. Her nature was as cloudless and blue as her eyes. She adored her mother, was inseparable from her doll, and took good care of her dress, her red shoes and her violin. But most of all, she loved going to sleep listening to the voice of the Angel of Music.'

When the fiddler reached that part of the story, Raoul would look at Christine's blue eyes and golden hair. And Christine would think that little Lotte was very lucky to be able to hear the Angel of Music as she went to sleep. There was hardly a story which M. Daaé told that did not involve the Angel of Music, and both children asked him time and time again to say who this Angel was. He claimed that all great musicians, all great singers are visited by the Angel of Music at least once in their lives. Sometimes he leans over their cradles, as happened to little Lotte, and that is why there are child prodigies of six who play the violin better than grown men of fifty, a fact which, you must admit, is quite extraordinary. In other cases, the Angel appears much later because children are badly behaved and won't learn their lessons or practise their scales. Sometimes the Angel never comes at all because some children don't have a pure heart or a clear conscience. No one has ever seen the Angel, but he speaks to the hearts of the chosen. He often comes when they least expect it, when they feel downcast and discouraged. Then their ears fill with the harmonies of the spheres, a divine voice, and remember that moment for the rest of their lives. Those who are visited by the Angel blaze with a fire that never stops burning. They experience a thrill unknown to the rest of mortal kind. They are blessed, for they never pick up an instrument or open their mouths to sing without producing sounds whose beauty puts all other human sounds to shame. Those unaware that such fortunate individuals have been visited by the Angel say that they have been touched by genius.

Little Christine once asked her father if he had heard the Angel. But he shook his head sadly, but then his eyes lit up as he looked at her.

'But you, darling girl,' he said, 'you shall hear it one day! When I'm in heaven, I'll send him down to you. I promise.'

Around this time, M. Daaé began to cough.

Autumn came and separated Raoul and Christine.

They saw each other again three years later. They were now adolescents. Again, they met at Perros and the episode made a strong impression on Raoul which stayed with him for the rest of his life. Professor Valerius had died but his widow had remained in France, where she had made a life for herself, with M. Daaé and his daughter who continued to sing and play the violin. Their generous patron seemed to live solely for music, their music, for she surrendered gladly to their sweet harmonies. The young Viscount had come to Perros on the off-chance of finding them, and it was now his good fortune to be back in the house where his little friend had stayed. The first person he saw was old Daaé, who got out of his chair, embraced him tearfully, and said of course they remembered him. In fact, hardly a day had gone by when Christine had not mentioned his name. The old man was still talking when the door opened and Christine, captivating and eager, entered carrying a laden tea tray. She knew Raoul at once and put the tray down. A faint blush flickered across her pretty face. Uncertain of herself, she did not speak. The father gazed at both of them. Raoul approached her and kissed her cheek. She did not try to evade the embrace. She asked him a few questions, did her duties as hostess with aplomb, picked up the tray and left the room. She ran out into the garden and found refuge on a bench in a quiet corner. She was shaken by emotions new to her adolescent heart. Raoul joined her there and they talked until evening, very awkwardly. They were both quite changed and were disconcerted by the changes in each other which seemed to be very marked. They were as wary as diplomats and spoke of things unconnected with their new feelings. When they parted at the roadside, Raoul kissed her trembling hand and said: 'I shall never forget you!' Then he walked away, already regretting his boldness, for he knew that Christine Daaé could never be the wife of the Viscount de Chagny.

Christine went back to her father.

'Do you think Raoul isn't as nice as he used to be? I don't like him anymore!'

And she tried to put him out of her mind. It wasn't easy but she managed it, taking refuge in her art which took up all her time. She made wonderful progress. Those who heard her predicted that she would be the world's finest soprano. But meanwhile her father died and quite suddenly with his going she also seemed to have lost her voice, her soul and her genius. But enough remained for her to be admitted to the Paris Conservatoire, though with not much to spare. She did not make much of a mark, attended classes unenthusiastically and managed to win a prize just to please Mme Valerius with whom she continued to live.

The first time Raoul saw her at the Opera, he was struck by her beauty and basked in pleasant memories of their past. But he had been very surprised by a certain negative quality in her work. She seemed detached. He came back to listen to her. He followed her backstage where he lay in wait for her behind a painted flat. He tried to attract her attention. More than once he pursued her as far as the door of her dressing room, but she never saw him. Indeed she never appeared to see anyone. She was indifference itself. Raoul was hurt because she was beautiful: he was shy and didn't even admit to himself that he was in love. And then there had been the lightning bolt of the evening of the gala concert: the heavens had opened and an angel's voice had descended to earth, captivating men's souls and capturing his heart…

But then there was that other voice, the man's voice which, though there was no one there, had come through her door: 'You must love me!'

Why had she laughed when on opening her eyes he'd said '*I'm the little boy who once ran into the sea to rescue your scarf*.' Why hadn't she recognized him? And why had she written that note?

The road to the coast stretched on and on, unwinding never-endingly. Here's the cross where three roads meet! There the deserted moor, the frozen heather, the land motionless under a milky sky! The windows of the coach rattle, the panes tinkle in his ears… Such a powerful noise for so little progress! He recognizes the cottages… the fields, raised banks and trees that line the road… Here's the last bend in the road, beyond it begins to go down and he'll see the sea… wide-armed Perros Bay!

She's staying at the Setting Sun Inn, must be, it's the only one! Besides, it's very comfortable. He remembers that, back then, they'd listened to lots of stories here! His heart beats faster. What will she say when she sees him again?

The first person he set eyes on when he walked into the inn's old, smoke-darkened parlour was Mme Tricard, the landlady. She knew him at once. She said how well he looked. She asked what had brought him there. He blushed. He said he had business at Lannion and had decided to 'push on and call in to say hello'. She asked if he wanted breakfast but he said: 'Later'. He seemed to be waiting for something or someone. Then the door opened.

He leaped to his feet. He hadn't been mistaken, there she was! He opened his mouth to speak then closed it again. She stood before him, smiling and not looking the least surprised. Her cheeks were fresh and pink, like a strawberry grown in shade. She was slightly flustered, perhaps from walking too fast. Her bosom, which concealed an honest heart, swelled gently. Her eyes, two clear pale-blue mirrors, the colour of the still lakes which dream at the northern edge of

the world, were a reflection of her guileless nature. Her fur coat hung half open, revealing a slender figure and the harmonious lines of her graceful young body. Raoul and Christine looked at each other. Mme Tricard smiled and, the soul of discretion, slipped quietly away. Finally, Christine spoke:

'You came. I'm not surprised. As I walked back from mass, I had a feeling I might find you here in the inn. *Someone* told me, at the church. It's true: I was told you were here.'

'Who was it?' asked Raoul and he reached for her tiny hand which she did not try to draw back.

'My poor dead father, of course!'

A silence sprang up between the two young people which was finally broken by Raoul:

'And did your father also tell you that I love you, Christine, and that I can't live without you?'

Christine blushed bright scarlet and looked away. Then she said in a trembling voice:

'Love me? Have you taken leave of your senses?'

And she burst out laughing to hide her confusion.

'Don't laugh, Christine, I'm serious.'

Soberly she answered:

'I didn't make you come here so that you could say such things.'

'But you did "make me come", Christine. You guessed what effect your letter would have: you knew I would come to Perros. How would you have thought of writing if you didn't think I loved you?'

'I thought you'd remember our childish games and how my father used to join in. But I don't really know quite what I thought… Perhaps I was wrong to write. The way you suddenly reappeared in my dressing room that night took me back, to the old days, a long time ago. It was the little girl I was then who wrote. She was feeling sad and lonely and wanted to see her little friend again.'

For a while, they said nothing. There was something in Christine's attitude which Raoul thought wasn't quite normal, though he could not have said what. But he had no sense that she was hostile. On the contrary, the tenderness in her unhappy eyes told him as much. But why should her tender feelings be unhappy ones?… That was what he needed to know and the question urged him on.

'When you saw me in your dressing room, was that the first time you'd noticed me?'

Christine was incapable of lying.

'No!' she said. 'I'd already seen you several times in your brother's box. And backstage.'

'I thought so,' said Raoul, pursing his lips. 'But tell me why, that night in your dressing room when you saw me kneeling at your side reminding you that I'd fished your scarf out of the sea, why on earth did you react as if you didn't know me? And why did you laugh?'

The tone of these questions was so direct that Christine was taken aback and didn't answer. Raoul too was stunned by this sudden quarrel which he had rashly started just when he'd vowed that he would speak to Christine only in words of kindness, love and respect. A husband or a lover who has earned the right, would have spoken no differently to a wife or mistress who had wronged him in some way. But he cursed himself for going too far and, knowing that he'd behaved foolishly, found no better way out of this ludicrous pass than by deciding to behave odiously.

'So you won't answer!' he cried, now as furious as he was unhappy. 'Well, I'll answer for you! It was because there was someone else in your dressing room and you felt awkward because you didn't want that someone to find out that you could care for anyone else but him!'

'If anyone made me feel awkward, Raoul,' Christine broke in icily… 'if anyone that evening made me feel awkward, it was you, because you're the one I told to leave!'

'Yes! So you could be alone with that other man!'

'What are you talking about?' said Christine in a faltering voice. 'What other man?'

'The man you spoke to. You said: "I sing only for you! Tonight I gave you my soul and I am dead."'

Christine clutched Raoul's arm and held it with a fierceness no one would have dreamed possible in so delicate a creature.

'You were listening behind the door?'

'Yes! Because I love you… I heard everything.'

'What exactly did you hear?' asked Christine who had become strangely calm. She released Raoul's arm.

'He said: "You must love me!"'

At these words, a deathly pallor crept across her face and shadows seemed to gather around her eyes… She rocked and seemed about to fall. Raoul rushed to her, arms out ready, but already Christine was over her passing faintness and in a low, almost hushed voice she said:

'Say it! Say it again! Say everything you heard!'

Raoul stared at her, uncertain and not understanding what was happening.

'Please! Say it! Can't you see this is killing me?'

'I also heard what he said when you told him you'd given him your soul: "You have a beautiful soul, my dear, and I thank you for it. No emperor was ever given so great a gift! Tonight the angels wept!"'

Christine put her hand to her heart. She gazed at Raoul, her eyes full of some indefinable emotion. They were piercing, so fixed and staring: a mad person's eyes. Raoul did not know what to think. And then they grew moist and down her ivory cheeks, like two pearls, rolled two heavy tears.

'Christine!'

'Raoul!'

He reached out his hands to hold her, but she slipped through them and ran off in a state of considerable agitation.

While Christine remained shut up in her room, Raoul cursed himself for behaving like a callous brute. Yet at the same time, jealousy coursed hotly through his veins. Judging by the way she had reacted when she discovered that he knew her secret, it had to be a very important secret! Despite everything he'd heard, Raoul never believed for one moment that Christine was anything other than pure in every way. He knew that she had a reputation for leading a virtuous life but he was not so naive that he did not know that some performers are sometimes propositioned. She was right to say that she had given her soul, for it was patently obvious that what she was talking about was singing and music. But was it obvious? If so, why had she been so upset? Dear God, Raoul was so unhappy! If he'd been able to face the man, or *the man's voice*, he'd have made sure he got proper answers.

Why had Christine run away? Why hadn't she come back?

He refused lunch. He felt very frustrated. It was galling to see hours, which he had hoped to spend pleasantly, tick away while the beautiful young Swede was nowhere near. Why wasn't she out with him, roaming through the countryside where they had so many memories to share? And since she seemed to have no particular reason for being at Perros and wasn't actually doing anything there, why was she not heading straight back to Paris? He'd discovered that she had ordered a mass to be said that morning for the repose of her father's soul and had remained praying for a considerable time both in the little church and over his gravestone outside.

Sad and dejected, Raoul walked towards the cemetery which surrounded the church. He pushed open the gate and wandered by himself among the graves, reading the inscriptions on the headstones. When he reached the area behind the choir, he knew that he had found what he was looking for by the bright colours of the flowers which lay on a granite tombstone and overflowed onto the frost-white ground. Their scent filled that frozen corner of the Breton winter. They were miraculous red roses which seemed to have opened that very morning, in the snow, a reminder of life among the dead for here, death was everywhere. It had

spilled out onto the earth which had returned its overflowing surfeit of corpses. Skeletons and skulls by the hundred had been piled up against the church wall and were held in place by flimsy wire netting which left the whole macabre heap fully visible. The skulls, stacked and neatly arranged like bricks, and stabilized at intervals by bleached bones, might have been the footing on which the rest of the walls of the sacristy had been built. The sacristy door opened onto this gruesome rampart, a feature of so many old Breton churches.

Raoul said a prayer for M. Daaé, then, somewhat unnerved by the permanent leers which skulls always wear on their faces, he left the cemetery, climbed back up the hill and sat down on the edge of the moor overlooking the sea. The wind savaged the shingle and yelped at the faint, weak light of the day which surrendered and retreated until it was no more than a bright strip on the horizon. The wind dropped. It was evening. Raoul was wrapped in icy shadow but he did not feel the cold. All his thoughts, all his memories strayed freely over the empty, desolate moor. When they were children, he used to come to this very spot often at dusk with Christine to see the goblins dance at the rising of the moon. He'd never seen any, though his eyes were sharp. But Christine, who was slightly short-sighted, claimed to have seen hundreds. He smiled at the thought and then gave a sudden start. A figure, solid in form, a figure which had materialized without his knowing how, without his being warned by the slightest sound, was now standing by his side. It said:

'Do you think there'll be goblins tonight?'

It was Christine. He tried to speak, but she covered his lips with her gloved hand.

'Listen to me, Raoul. I have decided to tell you something important, very important!'

Her voice trembled. He waited. She sounded strained. She went on:

'Do you remember the legend of the Angel of Music?'

'Of course I do!' he cried. 'And I do believe it was just here that your father first told it to us!'

'It was here too that he said: "When I'm in heaven, I shall send him to you." Listen Raoul. My father is in heaven now and I have been visited by the Angel of Music!'

'Of course you have,' said Raoul gravely, for he understood her to mean that she was piously grafting her father's memory on to her triumph at the gala concert.

Christine seemed somewhat taken aback by the casual way the Viscount de Chagny took the news that she had been visited by the Angel of Music.

'What did you think I meant, Raoul?' she asked, and she brought her pale face so close to his that he felt sure she was about to kiss him. But all she wanted, in the growing gloom, was to read what was in his eyes.

'I think', he said, 'that no human being could sing as you did that evening without some sort of miraculous intervention, without the Almighty having a hand in it. But there is no music professor alive who could ever teach anyone to sing like that. Oh yes, Christine: you've heard the Angel of Music.'

'Yes I did,' she said solemnly, 'I heard him *in my dressing room*. That's where he comes every day and gives me lessons.'

The emphasis with which she said these words was so peculiar that Raoul glanced at her anxiously, the way you might look at someone who has just said something outrageous or claimed to have seen some crazy vision which they believe in with all the might of their poor sick brain. But she had drawn away and now stood motionless, just another shadow in the night.

'In your dressing room?' he asked, like a foolish echo.

'Yes, that's where I heard him. And I was not the only one.'

'Who else heard, Christine?'

'You did of course.'

'Me? I heard the Angel of Music?'

'Yes, that evening. He was the voice you heard talking when you were listening outside the door. It was his voice saying: "You must love me!" I thought I was the only one who could hear it. So you can imagine how amazed I was when you told me this morning that you'd heard it too!'

Raoul burst out laughing. At the same moment, the night fled from the deserted moor as the first light of the rising moon picked out the two young people. Christine turned back to face Raoul. She was hostile now and her eyes, normally so gentle, flashed with anger.

'What are you laughing at? Because you thought you were hearing a man's voice?'

'But that's what I did hear!' replied Raoul who, faced by Christine's embattled tone, was beginning to feel uneasy.

'How can you say that, Raoul? An old childhood friend! A friend of my father! I don't know you anymore! What did you take me for? I'm an honest woman, Viscount, and I am not in the habit of closeting myself in my dressing room with men's voices! If you'd opened the door, you would have seen that there was no one inside.'

'Quite true! After you'd gone, I did open the door and I found no one there…'

'You see!… So?'

The Viscount summoned up all his courage.

'So, Christine, I think someone is playing tricks on you.'

She cried out, turned and fled. He ran after her but she seemed wild with anger and kept screaming: 'Leave me alone! Let me be!'

And then she was gone. Raoul walked back to the inn. He was exhausted, dejected and in the lowest of spirits.

He was told that Christine had gone up to her room saying that she would not be down for dinner. Raoul enquired if she was unwell. Mme Tricard answered ambiguously that if she was it couldn't be anything very serious, and then, convinced the fuss was just a lovers' tiff, she strode off with a shrug of her shoulders muttering that it was a shame that these young people were wasting time on silly quarrels which the good Lord had given them here below to enjoy themselves.

Raoul dined alone, by the fire, and, as you will imagine, feeling very sorry for himself. Later, in his room, he tried to read. Later still, he went to bed and tried to sleep. No sound came from the room next door. What was Christine doing? Was she asleep? And if not, what was she thinking about? And what was he thinking about? Would he have been capable of saying? The strange conversation he'd had with Christine had disturbed him deeply!… He thought less *of* Christine than *around* her, and 'around' was a concept so diffuse, so nebulous, so elusive, that it made him oddly and painfully uneasy.

The hours passed slowly. It must have been half past eleven when he distinctly heard someone moving in the room next to his. The footsteps were light and furtive. Hadn't Christine gone to bed? Without thinking what he was doing, Raoul dressed quickly, taking care to make no noise. Then, ready for anything, he waited. But ready for what? He had no idea! His heart missed a beat when he heard Christine's door creak on its hinges. Where could she be going at this time of night when everyone in Perros was asleep? He half opened his door and in a patch of moonlight glimpsed the white figure of Christine gliding cautiously along the corridor. She reached the stairs and went down them. Above her, he leaned over the banister. Suddenly he heard two voices talking urgently. He caught the words: 'Don't lose the key.' It was Mme Tricard's voice. Then the door overlooking the harbour opened and then closed. Everything went quiet once more. Raoul hurried back to his room, ran to the window and opened it. The white figure of Christine stood on the deserted jetty.

The first floor of the Setting Sun Inn was not very high and the branches of an espaliered tree enabled Raoul to leave the premises without the landlady's suspecting that he was gone. Which was why, next morning, that good woman was dumbfounded when he was carried back, half frozen and more dead than alive. She was told he'd been found lying on the steps of the altar of Perros's little church. She hurried upstairs to give the news to Christine who came down at once and, helped by Mme Tricard, anxiously lavished every care on him. It was not long before he opened his eyes and he came round completely when he saw her lovely face looking down at him.

So what had happened? Several weeks later, when the tragedy at the Opera forced the authorities to intervene, Inspector Mifroid interviewed the Viscount de Chagny about the events of that night at Perros. This is how it was transcribed for the case file (Box-mark 150):

‘*Qu.* Did Mlle Daaé not see you leave your room by the unorthodox route you chose?

‘*Ans.* No, sir, she did not. I made no attempt to muffle the sound of my footsteps and I soon caught up with her. I asked just one thing of her, that she turn round, look at me and know it was me. I’d just finished telling myself that I’d been quite wrong to be following her and that the sort of spying I was doing was unworthy of me. But she didn’t seem to hear. In fact, she behaved exactly as if I wasn’t there. She retraced her steps along the jetty and then suddenly headed very fast up the road. The church clock had just struck a quarter to twelve and I had the feeling that this was the reason why she was walking so quickly, for now she almost broke into a run. In this way she arrived at the entrance to the cemetery.

‘*Qu*. Was the gate open?

‘*Ans.* Yes, Inspector. I thought it strange but it didn’t seem to bother Mlle Daaé in the least.

‘*Qu*. Was there anyone in the cemetery?

‘*Ans.* Not that I saw. If there had been, I’d have seen him. The moon was very bright, dazzling almost. It was reflected by the snow and made the night even lighter.

‘*Qu*. Could anyone have been hiding behind the graves?

‘*Ans.* No, sir. The headstones there are small, poor affairs and they were completely covered by the blanket of snow and just their crosses showed above ground. The only shadows were those made by those crosses and the two of us. The church was brilliantly lit. I’ve never seen such a light night. It was very beautiful, very clear and very cold. I’d never been in a graveyard at night and I had no idea you could find they could be so bright, a kind of “light that weighs nothing”.

‘*Qu*. Are you superstitious?

‘*Ans.* No. As a matter of fact, I’m a practising Catholic.

‘*Qu*. Describe your state of mind at the time.

‘*Ans.* My head was cool and I was quite calm. Admittedly, Mlle Daaé’s highly unusual foray threw me badly at first. But when I saw her enter the cemetery I assumed she was there to discharge some pious vow or other over her father’s grave and thought this so natural that I stopped worrying. But I was surprised she hadn’t heard me walking behind her, for my boots crunched on the snow. Still, I imagined that her mind was entirely occupied by her sacred mission. So I decided not to intrude and when she got to her father’s grave, I remained a few paces behind her. She knelt in the snow, crossed herself and began to pray. Just then, midnight struck. The third stroke had not died away when she suddenly raised her head. She gazed up at the heavens and stretched her arms out to the moon. I had a sense that she was in a kind of trance. I was still wondering what had happened so suddenly, so decisively to induce such a state when I found myself looking upwards too. Bewildered, I glanced all around me but my whole being seemed drawn by an invisible power, *an invisible power which was making music!* And such music! We knew it! Christine and I had heard it when we were children. But never had M. Daaé’s fiddle sung with such divine fire! All I could think of was what Christine had told me about the Angel of Music. I had no idea what to make of those unforgettable sounds which, if they weren’t pouring directly out of heaven, gave no indication of where else they could be coming from. Not from the here below, that’s for sure, for there was neither instrument nor hand nor bow on earth capable of it. I remember what the sublime music was. It was the *Resurrection of Lazarus.*[*] M. Daaé used to play it to us when he was feeling sad and meditative. If Christine’s “ghost” had been real, he could not have played it any better on the dead fiddler’s instrument. We were so overwhelmed by its invocation of Jesus that I almost expected to see Christine’s father’s grave open at our feet. I also recalled that M. Daaé had been buried with his violin. I’ll be frank. I have no idea, at that eerie but radiant moment, in that small graveyard in the back of beyond, next to a heap of skulls which grinned through their unmoving jaws, no idea at all how far my imagination ran away with me nor where it stopped.

‘But the music ended and my wits returned. I thought I detected a sound from somewhere near the pile of bones.

‘*Qu*. You heard sounds coming from the bones?

‘*Ans.* Yes. I had the feeling the skulls were laughing now and despite myself I felt a cold shiver run up my spine.

‘*Qu.* And didn’t you stop and think that the celestial fiddler who had bewitched your senses might have been hiding behind those bones?

‘*Ans.* I did think that, Inspector, so much so that it never crossed my mind to follow Mlle Daaé when she got to her feet and made her way calmly back to the gate. She was so absorbed that it’s not surprising she didn’t see me. I didn’t move but locked my eyes on the rampart of bones. I was determined to get to the bottom of this strange business and find answers.

‘*Qu.* And what happened next that led to your being found next morning lying half dead on the steps of the high altar?

‘*Ans.* It happened so fast… A skull landed at my feet… another rolled down… and another… It was as if I was the jack in some ghastly bowling game. It struck me that a careless movement had destabilized the structure behind which our ghostly fiddler had hidden. This became all the more likely when suddenly I saw a shadow pass across the brightly lit wall of the sacristy.

‘I was off like a shot. The shadow had already pushed the door open and had gone into the church. I ran in after him. He was wearing a cloak. I was quick enough to grab one end of it. By this time we had reached the high altar and there the light of the moon coming through the east window shone directly on us. As I wouldn’t let go of his cloak, the shadowy figure turned and the cloak flapped open and, Inspector, I saw a hideous death’s head which stared at me and burned as hot as all the fires of hell. I thought I had Satan himself by the tail! I’m as brave as the next man, but confronted by this apparition from beyond the grave, I must have passed out, for I remember nothing more until I woke up in my room at the Setting Sun Inn.’

06
A Visit to Box 5

We left Messrs Firmin Richard and Armand Moncharmin at the moment when they had just decided to 'take a closer look' at Box 5 on the grand tier.

Leaving behind them the wide staircase which leads from the lobby next to their office to the stage and its various sub-units, they crossed the 'floor' (the stage), reached the front of the house by the subscribers' door and entered the auditorium through the first corridor on the left. They made their way through the front rows of the stalls and gazed up at Box 5. They could not make it out very well partly because it was half dark inside and also because the red-velvet front armrests of all the boxes were covered by huge dust-sheets.

At that point, they more or less had the vast, shadowy hall to themselves and were surrounded by deep silence. It was the quiet hour, when the stagehands go off for a drink.

The entire crew had temporarily vacated the stage, leaving the set partially erected. A few shafts of light (it was pale and sinister and might have been stolen from a dying star) had squeezed through an aperture somewhere and lassoed the cardboard battlements of an ancient tower that stood on the stage. In that artificial night, or rather false daylight, everything acquired strange shapes. The material covering the seats in the stalls turned them into a raging sea whose grey-green waves had been instantaneously immobilized by the secret order of the Giant of the Storms who, as everyone knows, is called Adamastor.* Richard and Moncharmin were shipwrecked victims of the frozen chaos of a canvas sea. They struck out strongly towards the boxes on the left like sailors who have abandoned ship and make for the shore. The eight great columns of polished Vercors marble thrust upwards in the shadows like fantastic piles shoring up the looming, crumbling, bulging cliff whose geological strata were represented by the curved, parallel, sinuous lines of the balconies of the three tiers of boxes. From the top, from the great height of the cliff, lost in M. Lenepveu's copper ceiling,* faces scowled down, leering, fleering and jeering at the disquiet of Messrs Richard and Moncharmin. Yet the faces belonged to classical personages who were normally very well behaved and their names were: Isis, Amphitrite, Hebe, Flora, Pandora, Psyche, Thetis, Pomona, Daphne, Clytia, Galatea and Arethusa. Yes, Arethusa herself and Pandora (known to all on account of her box) peered down at the two new Directors of the Opera House who had finally found a piece of wreckage to cling to and from it were silently scrutinizing Box 5 on the grand tier.

I said that they were uneasy. At least I assume they were. Moncharmin certainly was, because he admitted he had been affected. This is how he put it:

> 'All that Phantom of the Opera nonsense (such style!) which had been kindly foisted on us after we took over from Messrs Debienne and Poligny doubtless played some part in upsetting the balance of my imagination and, I dare say, my eyesight too. Was it the unusual circumstances in which we found ourselves plus the extraordinary silence which made such an impression on us? Were we the objects of some kind of hallucination brought on by the half-light in the auditorium and the near-darkness filling Box 5? Because I saw, and M. Richard saw it too at the same time, a figure in Box 5! Richard didn't say anything. Neither did I. But we both instinctively clutched each other by the arm. We waited for a while, without moving, our eyes still glued to the same spot. But the figure had disappeared. We went back out through the corridor, where we discussed our impressions and tried to describe the *mysterious figure*. Unfortunately, the figure I described did not correspond in any way with the one Richard had seen. Mine was a kind of death's head resting on the front armrest of the box while Richard's was an old woman who looked rather like Mme Giry. In the end, we concluded we'd been the victims of a trick of the light. Laughing like lunatics, we rushed straight up to Box 5, walked right in and found no figures of any description inside.'

All of which takes us into Box 5.

It was exactly the same as all the grand-tier boxes. There was nothing to distinguish it from any of the others.

M. Richard and M. Moncharmin, ostensibly highly amused and still having a laugh, made a great show of moving the furniture around, lifting the dust-covers and the chairs. They peered very closely at the one in which *the voice usually sat*. But they concluded that the chair was blameless and found nothing magical about it. All in all, the box was the most ordinary of all the boxes, with its red hangings, chairs, carpet and armrest covered in red velvet. After inspecting the carpet with the greatest care and finding, here as elsewhere, nothing special, they moved down one floor into the box directly under Box 5 in the grand tier. In this ground-floor box 5, which is located near the exit from the orchestra stalls, stage-left, they found nothing worthy of note either.

'All these people must think we're fools,' M. Richard concluded. 'It's *Faust* on Saturday. We shall both watch the performance from Box 5 on the grand tier!'

07

In which Messrs Firmin Richard and Armand Moncharmin have the audacity to stage **Faust** *in an ill-fated theatre with catastrophic results*

BUT when they arrived in their office on the Saturday morning, the Directors found two copies of a letter from the Phantom. It read as follows:

'*Dear Directors*,

So is it to be war?

If you still want peace, these are my terms:

There are four conditions:

1. *Box 5 to be restored to me. I want it reserved for my exclusive use as of now.*
2. *The role of Marguerite to be sung this evening by Christine Daaé. Do not worry about Carlotta. She will be indisposed.*
3. *Mme Giry to be reinstated immediately. I require the excellent services of my faithful box-attendant.*
4. *I am to be informed, by a letter which Mme Giry will deliver to me, that, like your predecessors, you undertake to accept all the conditions set out in my memorandum of agreement in respect of my monthly allowance. I will leave instructions at a later date regarding the method by which the money will be paid to me.*

Failure to comply will mean that tonight's *Faust* will be staged in a theatre that is cursed.

You have been warned!

P. of the O.'

'Oh this Phantom business is too much!… It really is!' Richard cried furiously, shaking his avenging fists and thumping them down on his desk.

At that moment, Mercier, the Administrator, entered the office.

'Gentlemen, Lachenal is asking to see one of you,' he began. 'He said it's urgent. He looks very shaken.'

'Who is Lachenal?' growled Richard.

'He's your head groom.'

'What do you mean, head groom?'

'Well, sir,' explained Mercier, 'the Opera employs several grooms. He's the head one.'

'And what does this groom do?'

'He's in charge of the stables?'

'What stables?'

'Yours, sir. The Opera's stables.'

'There are stables at the Opera? By God, I never knew that! And where are they?'

'Underground, on the Rotonde* side of the building. It's an important unit. We have a dozen horses.'

'A dozen horses? Why, for heaven's sake?'

'For the processions in *La Juive, Le Prophète** and so on. We need trained horses that are used to "treading the boards". We employ grooms to train them. M. Lachenal is a highly skilled trainer. He used to be Franconi's equestrian director.'*

'I see. And what does he want with me?'

'I've no idea… but I've never seen him in such a state.'

'Show him in!…'

M. Lachenal marched into the office. He was holding a riding crop in one hand and with it flicked his boots crossly.

'Good morning, Lachenal,' said Richard, slightly awed. 'And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?'

'I've come, sir, to demand that you get rid of the whole lot of them.'

'What? You want me to get rid of all the horses?'

'Not the horses. The stable-men.'

'How many stable-men are there, M. Lachenal?'

'Six.'

'Six stable-men! That's at least two too many!'

'They are established posts,' Lachenal broke in, 'created and forced on us by the office of the Arts Ministry. They are currently filled by government nominees and if I may venture to…'

'I'm not interested in the government!' Richard said peremptorily. 'We don't need more than four stable-men for twelve horses.'

'Eleven!' said the head groom.

'Twelve!' repeated Richard.

'Eleven!' repeated Lachenal.

'But the Administrator told me you had twelve horses!'

'I did. But I've only got eleven now. Someone stole Caesar!' M. Lachenal thwacked his boot loudly with his crop.

'Caesar's been stolen?' cried the Administrator. 'Caesar, the white stallion we use in *Le Prophète*?'

'There's only one Caesar,' said the head groom curtly. 'I worked for Franconi for ten years and I've seen some horseflesh in my time and I can tell you, there's only one Caesar! And now someone's gone and stolen him!'

'How?'

'How should I know? Nobody has any idea! That's why I've come, to ask you to sack the lot of them!'

'What do the stable-men say?'

'Nothing sensible… some accuse the extras… others say it was the porter in Administration.'

'The porter in Administration!! I can personally vouch for the man!' protested Mercier.

'But surely, M. Lachenal,' cried Richard, 'you must have some idea?'

'As a matter of fact I do!' Lachenal interjected, 'and I'll tell you what it is. As far as I'm concerned, there's no doubt about it!' He came up close to both Directors and whispered in their ears: 'The perpetrator was… the Phantom!'

Richard jumped.

'Not you too!'

'What d'you mean, not me too? It's only natural…'

‘What do I mean, M. Lachenal? What do I mean?…’

‘… only natural I should tell you what I think after what I saw…’

‘And what exactly did you see, M. Lachenal?’

‘What I saw, as plain as I see the nose on your face, was a black shadow riding a white horse that was the spitting image of Caesar.’

‘Why didn’t you chase after this white horse and the black shadow?’

‘I did, sir. I ran after them and I yelled, but they took off at an amazing lick and vanished in the darkness of the under-gallery.’

M. Richard stood up.

‘That’s all, M. Lachenal, you may go… We shall lodge an official complaint against the *Phantom*.’

‘And you’ll send all my stable-men packing?’

‘Of course! I give you good day, sir!’

M. Lachenal nodded and left.

Richard was fuming.

‘I want you to pay that idiot off at once!’

‘But he’s a friend of the junior minister!’

‘And he goes to Tortoni’s for a preprandial drink with Lagréné, Scholl and Pertuiset,* the lion hunter,’ added M. Moncharmin. ‘We’ll have the entire press breathing on our necks. He’ll blab the tale of the Phantom and we’ll be a laughing stock. And if we become ridiculous, we’re finished.’

‘Oh very well, we’ll say no more about it,’ said Richard who was already thinking about something else.

At that moment, the door burst open. The usual porter could not have been at his post for Mme Giry walked in unopposed. There was a letter in her hand and she could not wait to speak:

‘Beg pardon, excuse me, but this morning I got a letter from the Phantom of the Opera. He said I was to come and see you and that you’d have something to give me for…’

She did not finish her sentence. She saw Firmin Richard’s face: it was convulsed. The respectable Director of the Opera House looked as if he were about to explode. So far the only outward sign of the rage which shook him was the crimson flush of his wild face and the incandescent flash of his glaring eyes. He did not speak. He couldn’t speak. But suddenly he was moved to act. First, his left arm seized the picturesque person of Mme Giry and twirled her round so unexpectedly that her rapid pirouette extracted a shriek from her. Then it was his right foot, the good right foot of the same Director, which planted the sole of its shoe on the black taffeta of a skirt which had never ever, in such a place, suffered such an outrage.

It happened so fast that when Mme Giry found herself outside in the lobby, her head was still spinning and she didn’t know what was going on. Then she realized what had happened and the Opera House rang with her indignant shrieks, wild protests and death threats. It took three porters to get her down to the administrative courtyard and two constables to eject her into the street.

At about the same time, Carlotta, who lived in a small house in the Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, rang for her maid who brought her post to her in bed. Among the correspondence was an anonymous letter which said:

‘If you appear tonight, be warned that something very unpleasant will happen when you open your mouth… and it will be a fate worse than death.’

This threat was written in red ink, in a halting, dislocated scrawl.

After reading it, Carlotta lost her appetite for breakfast. She pushed away the tray on which her maid had brought her steaming hot chocolate, sat up in her bed and thought deeply. This wasn’t the first letter of its kind that she’d received, but never had one been quite so threatening.

On the other hand, she was convinced she was the victim of countless petty jealousies and usually said that she had an unknown enemy who was bent on destroying her. She claimed he was hatching some devious plot, a cabal against her which would be activated one of these days. But, she added, she was not a woman to be so easily intimidated.

The truth was that if there really were a cabal it was the one orchestrated by La Carlotta herself against poor, unsuspecting Christine. She had not forgiven Christine for the success she had scored when she had stood in for her as a last-minute replacement.

When she’d been told about the extraordinary reception her understudy had been given, La Carlotta had been instantly cured both of an incipient attack of bronchitis and a fit of the sulks directed at the management. Thereafter, she gave no indication that she had any intention of terminating her contract. She had striven with all her might to ‘cut out’ her rival by persuading powerful friends to use their influence with the Directors to ensure that Christine was given no further opportunities for fresh triumphs. Certain newspapers which had begun to rave about Christine’s talent now wrote only of the glorious gifts of La Carlotta. Not least, when they met in the theatre, the famous diva said the most outrageous things about Christine and did everything she could to make life unpleasant for her.

La Carlotta had neither heart nor soul. She was… a voice!… but a wonderful voice, of course. Her repertoire included everything capable of tempting any ambitious artist, not only the works of the German masters but of the French and Italians too. Never until now had anyone heard La Carlotta sing a wrong note, nor be deficient in the voice-power necessary to render any passage of her immense repertoire. Her voice had range, it was powerful and admirably accurate. But no one would have said of her what Rossini told La Krauss after she’d sung, in German, ‘Sombre forests!’:* ‘You sing with your soul, my dear, and you have a beautiful soul!’

Where was your soul, Carlotta, when you danced in the stews of Barcelona? Where was it later, in Paris, when you sang vulgar songs on cheap stages as an ‘artiste’ of the music-hall? Where was it at private sessions staged by your lover for his betters, when you unleashed the power of that versatile, wondrous voice which could sing of the purest love and the coarsest pleasures with the same cold perfection? O Carlotta, if you ever had a soul and mislaid it, you should have rediscovered it when you became Juliette or Elvira or Ophelia or Marguerite! For others have risen from humbler beginnings and been purified by art abetted by love!

Truly, when I think of all the petty vexations and spitefulness Christine Daaé had to put up with from Carlotta at that time, I can barely contain my anger. No wonder I express my feelings as sweeping generalizations about art in general, and the art of singing in particular, which will certainly not please Carlotta’s many admirers.

When La Carlotta had done reflecting on the threat contained in the letter she had received, she got up.

‘We’ll see,’ she said… And with a determined snort, she uttered a few choice oaths in her native Spanish.

The first thing she saw when she looked out of the window was a hearse. The hearse plus the letter were enough to convince her superstitious mind that the threat was genuine and that she ran a serious risk that evening of being confronted with real danger. She summoned every last one of her admirers to her house, told them that during the evening’s performance she would face a cabal organized by Christine Daaé, and urged them to respond in kind by packing the auditorium with her, Carlotta’s, own supporters. There was no shortage of them, was there? She counted on them to be prepared for any eventuality and to drown out the hecklers if, as she feared, they made trouble.

M. Richard’s private secretary called to get the latest news of La Carlotta’s health. He went away with assurances that she was perfectly fit and, even if she were ‘at death’s door’, she vowed she would still sing the role of Marguerite that evening. The secretary had come with his chief’s special recommendation that the diva should take no risks, remain indoors and protect herself against draughts. After he left, La Carlotta could not help sensing a link between this highly unusual and very unexpected advice and the threat contained in the letter.

It was five o'clock when another anonymous letter came through the post. The writing was the same as that of the first. It was terse:

'You have a cold. If you are sensible, you will see that it would be madness to sing tonight.'

La Carlotta gave a bold laugh, shrugged those magnificent shoulders and released two or three notes to settle her nerves.

Her friends were as good as their word. That night, they were all at the Opera, but they looked in vain for the wild conspirators they were there to silence. With the exception of a handful of outsiders, a small number of respectable citizens with placid faces that reflected no purpose other than of listening to music which they had long approved of, the audience consisted entirely of regulars whose refined, unwarlike, civilized manners ruled out any possibility of a riot. The only unusual thing was the presence of Messrs Richard and Moncharmin in Box 5. La Carlotta's friends thought that maybe both Directors had caught a whiff of possible trouble and wanted to be in the auditorium to stop it as soon as it began. But that was not the real reason, as the reader knows: both Directors were thinking only of the Phantom.

'Nothing! In vain a word in wakeful vigil I seek to hear
From nature and the Lord of all creation;
Yet no voice whispers in my ear
One single word of consolation!'

The famous baritone Carolus Fonta had just begun Faust's first summons to the powers of darkness when M. Richard, who was sitting in the Phantom's usual place—first chair on the right in the front row—leaned across to his colleague in the best of spirits and said:

'Have any unearthly voices whispered a word in your ear lately?'

'Careful! Let's not be hasty,' M. Moncharmin replied in the same amused vein. 'The performance has only just begun and, as you know, the Phantom does not usually come until the middle of the first act.'

Act I passed off without incident. This came as no surprise to La Carlotta's supporters since Marguerite does not sing in Act I. When the curtain came down, the Directors looked at each other with a smile.

'One down!' said Moncharmin.

'The Phantom's late,' said Firmin Richard.*

Moncharmin, ever a man for a joke, said:

'Actually, quite a good house for a theatre *which has a curse on it!*'

Richard managed a superior smile and pointed out to his colleague a large, rather vulgar woman dressed in black sitting in the middle of the stalls sandwiched between two ordinary-looking men in broadcloth frock coats.

'What sort of "patrons" are they?' asked Moncharmin.

'Those "patrons", my dear fellow, are my concierge, her brother and her husband.'

'You gave them free tickets?'

'Of course… My concierge has never been to the Opera… this is her first time… and since she'll be coming every night from now on, I wanted her to have a good seat before she starts showing other people to theirs.'

Moncharmin asked him to explain. Richard told him that as a temporary measure, he'd persuaded his concierge, in whom he had every confidence, to fill the post vacated by Mme Giry.

'Talking of Mme Giry,' said Moncharmin, 'are you aware she intends to make a complaint against you?'

'Against who? The Phantom?'

The Phantom! M. Moncharmin had almost forgotten all about him.

In fact the mysterious ghost had done nothing to remind Messrs Richard and Moncharmin of his existence.

Suddenly the door of their box was flung open to reveal the panic-stricken figure of the stage manager.

'What's the matter?' they both asked, astounded to see the man there at that moment.

'The matter', said the stage manager, 'is that it seems supporters of Christine Daaé have organized a cabal against La Carlotta who is absolutely furious!'

'What's the trouble now?' said Richard with a frown.

But the curtain rose on the village fair and the Directors gestured to the stage manager to go.

When he'd gone, Moncharmin leaned over and said in Richard's ear:

'So Daaé has friends, then?'

'Yes,' said Richard, 'she does.'

'Like who?'

Richard glanced across at a grand-tier box opposite occupied by just two men.

'The Count de Chagny?'

'Yes. It was he who recommended her to me… and so warmly that if I didn't know he was… er… close to La Sorelli…'

'Fancy that,' murmured Moncharmin. 'And who is the pale young fellow sitting next to him?'

'His brother, the Viscount de Chagny.'

'Shouldn't he be in bed? He looks ill.'

The stage rang with carousing songs. Drinking set to music. The cup triumphant.

'Wine or beer, beer or wine
No matter which: fill this glass of mine.'

Students, solid citizens, soldiers, girls and their mothers danced merrily in front of an inn named after the god Bacchus.

Enter Siebel.

Christine Daaé looked wonderful in male clothes. The bloom of youth and her melancholy grace had an instant impact. La Carlotta's supporters immediately assumed that her entrance would be greeted by an ovation which would show how her cabal planned to behave. But an ovation at this stage would have been inappropriate, totally the wrong move. It did not happen.

On the contrary, when Marguerite crossed the stage and had sung the only two lines of her role in this act,

'No, sirs, I am not maid nor pretty
And do not need your kind civility,'

La Carlotta was given a tremendous reception. It was so unexpected and so uncalled-for that members of the audience not in the know looked at each other and wondered what on earth was going on. But the act again ended without incident. Everyone thought: 'It'll happen in Act II'. But a few, who seemed slightly better informed, agreed that 'they'd kick up a storm' at the start of the ballad of the King of Thule, and hurried off to the subscribers' door to tell La Carlotta.

The two Directors left their box during the interval to find out more about the cabal the stage manager had talked about. But they were soon back in their seats shrugging their shoulders and treating the whole business as so much nonsense. The first thing they saw when they entered was a box of English chocolates on the front armrest. Who'd put it there? They went out and questioned all the box-attendants but no one knew anything about it. This time, when they got back, they saw a pair of opera glasses next to the sweets. They looked at each other. Neither felt like laughing. They remembered what Mme Giry had told them… and then… they thought they could feel a strange kind of draught… They sat in silence, distinctly uneasy.

The stage showed Marguerite's garden:

'Lovely flowers, hear my plea:
Will you speak my love for me?'

As she sang, with her bouquet of roses and lilac in her hand, Christine looked up and saw the Viscount de Chagny in his box. Thereafter, her voice did not seem to sound as assured, as pure, as crystal-clear as usual. Something was masking it, dulling it, though it was unclear what it might be… But underneath it were notes of fear and trembling.

'Odd girl,' one of La Carlotta's supporters said in an almost audible whisper from his seat in the stalls. 'The other night she was sublime and this evening she's bleating like a nanny-goat. She's got no experience, no technique!'

'Gentle flowers, in you I trust
Speak for me! You must!'

The Viscount held his head in his hands and wept. Behind him, the Count bit savagely on the end of his waxed moustache, gave a shrug and scowled. For the Count, ordinarily so cool and controlled, to display his innermost feelings so blatantly, he had to be very angry indeed. And so he was. He had seen his brother return from a short, mysterious trip in an alarming state of health. The explanation he'd given had not put the Count's mind at rest. Anxious to know what to make of it all, he had asked to see Christine Daaé who had the effrontery to say that she was not at home either to him or his brother. He assumed that there was some abominable scheme afoot. He could not forgive Christine for making Raoul suffer, but he was even less prepared to forgive Raoul for letting Christine make him suffer. Oh, what a mistake he'd made in taking up with a singer whose single triumph was a mystery to everyone!

'May one bloom upon her lips
Plant at least one melting kiss!'

'The artful hussy!' the Count muttered.

And he wondered what she wanted… what her expectations were… She was a good girl by all accounts; everyone said she had no lovers or protectors of any kind… This Angel of the North was a sly little minx!

Behind the curtain of hands which hid his adolescent tears, Raoul had no thoughts except of the letter he had received when he'd got back to Paris where Christine, fleeing from Perros like a thief in the night, had preceded him.

'Dear friend of former days,

'You must be brave and never try to see or talk to me again… If you love me at all, do this for me. Dear Raoul, I will never forget you. Above all, you must stay away from my dressing room. It's more than my life is worth. And yours too.

'Your Christine'

Thunderous applause greeted the entrance of La Carlotta.

The garden act unfolded with the usual turns of the plot.

When Marguerite finished singing the ballad of the King of Thule, she was given an ovation. She was given another when she came to the end of the Jewel Song:

'I laugh to look at my reflection
And see my beauty's fine perfection!'

Now sure of herself, sure of her supporters in the audience, sure of her voice and of her success, no longer afraid, La Carlotta held nothing back, but gave everything with passion, fire and wild abandon. Her performance was without restraint or modesty… She had ceased to be Marguerite: she was Carmen.* The applause rose to new heights and her duet with Faust seemed to be building towards another triumph for her when suddenly, out of the blue, an awful thing happened.

Faust was down on one knee:

'Let me gaze upon your face:
Here the moon's pale hue
Shines down upon this place
And lights your beauty too.'

And Marguerite replied:

'Ah!, how strange the silence and the evening's charm
Which like a spell now tightly holds me
And a sweet, soft melody enfolds me…'

At this point… at that exact moment… the awful thing happened, as I said… something dreadful.

The audience got to its feet as one… In their box both Directors could not suppress a horrified cry… In the audience, men and women looked around as if to ask their neighbours for an explanation for such an unexpected phenomenon… La Carlotta's face wore an expression of the deepest anguish, her eyes looked

haunted, mad. The wretched creature drew herself up, her mouth still half-open, half delivered herself of that *sweet soft melody* which had *enfolded her.* But no melody passed those lips… *she did not dare sing another word or note.*

For that mouth which had been created to make beautiful sounds, that voice which had never failed her, that magnificent instrument which had produced the finest harmonies, the most difficult chords, the smoothest modulations, the fiercest rhythms, a sublime human mechanism which, to be godlike, needed only that final divine spark which alone releases true emotion and lifts the soul… that mouth had opened and let out…

That mouth had spawned…

A toad!

A disgusting, hideous, scaly, poisonous, slimy, clammy, croaking toad!

How had it got there? How could it have squatted on her tongue? Back legs braced under it ready to jump higher and further, it had crouched furtively in her larynx and leaped out with a loud *skaaark!*

Skaark! Skaark!… that awful *skaark!*

Of course, we speak here of toads only in a metaphorical sense. There was nothing to see but, by God! there was plenty to hear. *Skaark!*

The whole auditorium was spattered with it, so to speak. No member of the tribe of batrachians on the banks of frog-loud ponds ever rent the veil of night with a more horrendous *skaark!*

It had been so utterly unexpected. La Carlotta could not believe her throat or ears. A thunderbolt landing at her feet would have left her less stunned than this *skaarking* toad which had just sprung from her mouth…

But a thunderbolt would not have meant humiliation. Everyone knows that a toad that squats on the tongue invariably spells ruination for a singer. Some have even died of the shame.

Who would have believed it?… She had been giving her all to 'Which like a spell now tightly holds me, And a sweet, soft melody enfolds me…', singing effortlessly, as she always did, with the same ease with which you or I say: 'Good morning, Madame, and how are you today?'

Now it is undeniable that there are over-confident singers who make the mistake of not pacing themselves and are conceited enough to make impossible demands on the voice which Heaven bestowed on them by forcing it to reach for notes they were never meant to sing. It is at such moments, when they least expect it, that the good Lord punishes them by inserting a toad in their mouths, a toad that goes *skaark!* Everyone present knew it for a fact. But absolutely no one thought for one moment that La Carlotta, who had a voice with a span of at least two octaves, would ever get a toad in her throat!

How could they have forgotten her full high Fs and unbelievable *staccati* in *The Magic Flute*? And then there was *Don Juan* in which she sang Elvira and in one performance earned the most fantastic ovation by singing the top B flat that her colleague as Doña Anna couldn't manage. So what was the reason for that ghastly croak which lay in wait at the end of the gentle, melodious, quiet phrase '… And a sweet, soft melody enfolds me…'?

It wasn't natural. There had to be some kind of bewitchery behind it. That croak came with a whiff of brimstone. Poor, wretched, distraught, crushed Carlotta!

The puzzled murmur that ran through the audience grew louder. If such a thing had happened to any other singer, she would have been roundly booed. But for Carlotta, whose voice was the perfect instrument, there was no anger, only dismay and alarm. Those (if any) who witnessed the monstrous dismemberment of the Venus de Milo must have experienced much the same appalled awe. And at least they saw the blows which removed her arms… and could understand how it happened.

But this? The *skaark* was incomprehensible.

It was so incomprehensible that for a few moments La Carlotta wondered whether she had really heard the note—was the sound really a note?—could it even be called a sound? A sound may be a kind of music—but that hellish noise which had emerged from her throat! She tried to convince herself that it hadn't happened, that it had been a trick her ears had played on her and not an ignoble betrayal by her voice.

Bewildered, she glanced all round as if she were looking for a place to hide, a shelter, or rather for some spontaneous reassurance that there was nothing wrong with her voice. Her fingers went to her throat in an apologetic, defensive gesture. No, no! That *skaark* had nothing to do with her! Carolus Fonta seemed to share her view, for he was gazing up at her with an indescribable expression of enormous, childlike amazement. He was still kneeling next to her. He hadn't moved from his mark. Perhaps he could tell her how such a thing had come about! But he couldn't! His eyes were mindlessly riveted on La Carlotta's mouth the way children gape at the conjuror's bottomless top hat. How could such a small mouth have contained such a large *skaark!*

Now all this—toad, *skaark*, shock, the alarmed buzz in the auditorium, confusion on stage and in the wings (a few minor members of the company poked panicky heads out)—all that I've described in detail was squeezed into a matter of seconds.

But those few ghastly seconds seemed an eternity, and not least to the Directors in Box 5. Moncharmin and Richard had turned very pale. This unprecedented and totally inexplicable turn of events filled them with foreboding which seemed all the more unearthly because for some moments they'd had a clear feeling that they were in the direct power of the Phantom.

They had felt his breath on them. It had raised the hair on the back of Moncharmin's neck… And Richard had wiped the perspiration from his forehead… Yes, the Phantom was there… around them… behind them… beside them… They could sense his presence but could not see him!… They heard him breathe… very close, so very close to them!… *You know if someone's there*… They knew, truly they did!… *They were convinced there were three of them in that box!*… The very thought made them quake… They wanted to get out of there… They didn't dare… They didn't dare move or say a word which would have told the Phantom that they knew he was there!… What would happen next? What lay around the corner?

What happened next was another *skaark!* Above the noise in the auditorium, everyone heard their joint cry of horror. *They felt they were in the Phantom's power!* Leaning over the armrest of their box, they gazed down at La Carlotta as if they didn't recognize her. By emitting that *skaark!* the infernal woman must have given the signal which would trigger some horrible calamity. They were fully expecting disaster to strike. The Phantom had warned it would come! The whole theatre was cursed! Both Directors' chests heaved under the weight of impending catastrophe. Then the audience heard Richard's half-strangled voice cry out to La Carlotta:

'What are you waiting for? Carry on!'

But La Carlotta did not carry on from where she had left off … Courageously, heroically, she went back to the beginning of the fatal passage which had ended with the *skaark!*

The noise died away and was followed by a deathly hush. La Carlotta's lone voice rang through the huge auditorium.

'Ah! how strange…'

The audience could not have agreed more:

'Which like a spell now tightly holds me—*skaark!*
And a sweet, soft melody enfolds me…—*skaark!*'

The toad had begun exactly where it had left off.

There was uproar in the theatre. The two Directors collapsed on to their chairs and were too drained to turn round even if they had dared. For they could hear the Phantom laughing at them! After all this time, on their right, they distinctly heard a voice, his impossible voice, the voice that had no mouth, the voice which said:

'The way she's singing tonight could well bring down the chandelier!'

With one movement, they both looked up at the ceiling and gave a horrified cry. The chandelier, the massive chandelier, was swinging, dropping towards them at the bidding of that satanic voice! Slipping its moorings, it hurtled down from the lofty heights of the vast auditorium and crashed into the middle of the stalls below. There was a chorus of shouts and screams, panic, a general stampede. It is not my intention to provide a graphic account of a historical moment. Readers who are interested are referred to newspaper reports of the time.* Many were injured and one female was killed.

The chandelier had fallen directly on the poor woman who had come to the Opera that night for the very first time in her life, the very person M. Richard had chosen as the new box-keeper who would replace Mme Giry, the Phantom's own attendant. She died instantly. The next day one newspaper appeared with this headline:

'200000 KILOS LAND ON CONCIERGE'S HEAD!'*

It was her only epitaph.

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said Firmin Richard: at this point, the serialized text (*Le Gaulois*, 21 and 22 October 1909) gives us an early glimpse of the Persian. Richard and Moncharmin observe him sitting in the stalls directly under the box occupied by Persia's new ambassador. He keeps his back to the Ambassador as if not wishing to be recognized, 'for it was rumoured that he had been an important man in Persia'. 'The Persian was a living enigma who had begun to annoy Parisian society. He never spoke, never smiled, came to every performance but showed no reaction.' The narrator then quotes Monsieur A. D…., one of M. Rémy's predecessors, a former secretary of the Opera House: 'He has been prowling through our Paris lives for a good number of years, always alone, always tight-lipped, but liking crowds, seeking them out, staring at them stonily by day and by lamplight, walking a little hesitantly, attending every production, always dressed the same way, in an astrakhan hat and an enveloping, black coat in the sleeves of which his perpetually restless hands never stop fidgeting.' The narrator repeats a further comment from the *Memoirs* of Moncharmin who noted that the Persian was a handsome man. He was 'of average height, with regular features and an expressive, manly face imprinted with the deepest melancholy, dark, burning melancholy eyes, a jet-black beard, amber-coloured skin made golden by the suns of the Orient…'. Moncharmin also noted that people stared at him and rattled their keys to ward off the evil eye. To compensate for this cut, Leroux allows the Persian a brief appearance at the beginning of Chapter 14.

08
The Mysterious Carriage

THAT fatal night turned out badly for all concerned. La Carlotta fell ill and Christine Daaé vanished after the performance. Two weeks later, she had still not been seen either in the theatre or outside it.

This first disappearance, which went largely unnoticed, must not be confused with the infamous abduction which in the not-too-distant future was to occur in such baffling and tragic circumstances.

Of course, Raoul was the first to find the diva's absence puzzling. He had written to her at Mme Valerius's address and received no reply. At first, he had not been unduly worried, knowing her state of mind and how determined she was to break off relations with him, even though he had yet to discover her reasons.

But his heartache had continued to grow and eventually he became seriously concerned when her name failed to appear in the cast of any production. *Faust* was staged without her.

One afternoon, at about five o'clock, he called on the Directors to ask why Christine Daaé had vanished without trace. Both men were now looking very worried. Even their friends no longer recognized them. They had lost all their zest and optimism. They could be seen walking around the Opera House, heads bowed, brows furrowed and pale-faced, as if they were haunted by some terrible thought or were the victims of the kind of malignant fate which attaches itself to a man and never lets him go.

The fall of the chandelier had made them liable on a number of fronts. But Messrs Richard and Moncharmin refused to be drawn on the subject.

The inquest had delivered a verdict of accidental death resulting from wear in the mechanism by which the chandelier had been hung. But it had been the responsibility of both the former and current Directors to identify the problem and put it right before it caused the disaster.

I must make it quite clear that at this point Messrs Richard and Moncharmin seemed so altered, so remote… so mysterious… so inscrutable… that many regular Opera-goers began to wonder if there wasn't something even more terrible than the fall of the chandelier to explain the change in them.

In their everyday dealings, they had no time for anyone except Mme Giry, who had been reinstated. So there are no prizes for imagining what kind of reception they gave the Viscount de Chagny when he came looking for news of Christine. They were terse and merely said that she was absent on leave. He asked how long she would be away. He was told curtly that no date had been set, since Mlle Daaé had asked for leave on health grounds.

'She's ill?' cried Raoul. 'What's the matter with her?'

'No idea!'

'You mean you haven't sent the Opera's doctor to see her?'

'No! She never asked for him and since we have every confidence in her we took her at her word.'

The story did not ring entirely true to Raoul who left the Opera with his mind full of sombre thoughts. He decided—and to hang with the consequences—to call on Mme Valerius and ask her directly. Of course he had not forgotten the categorical terms of Christine's letter in which she expressly forbade him to make any attempt to see her. But what he'd observed at Perros, what he'd heard outside her dressing-room door, the conversation he'd had with her on the edge of the moor, all made him suspect that something was going on which, though devilish enough, was definitely the work of some human agency. She had a young girl's overheated imagination and her tender and trusting heart, her early upbringing which had ringed her formative years with a circle of legends, the constant grieving for her dead father and above all the state of total rapture which the art of music induced in her whenever it revealed its wonders in exceptional circumstances—had he not been well placed to observe this for himself in the graveyard at Perros?—everything seemed more or less guaranteed to offer fertile ground for the malevolent workings of some mysterious and unscrupulous person. Whose victim was Christine Daaé? That was the very shrewd question which Raoul asked himself as he hurried round to Mme Valerius's apartment.

For the Viscount had a very cool head. True, he was a poet, loved music for its spiritual qualities and was a lover of old Breton tales which featured dancing elves. But above all he was in love with a fairy child from the north named Christine Daaé, though normally he had no truck with the supernatural, except in matters of religion, nor could the most fantastic story ever told make him forget that two and two make four.

What would Mme Valerius have to say to him? His hand shook at the thought as he rang the doorbell of a small apartment in the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires.

The door was opened by the same maid he had seen leaving Christine Daaé's dressing room on that memorable night. He asked if he might see Mme Valerius. He was told that she was unwell, had taken to her bed and was not at home to anyone.

'Just give her my card, would you?' he asked.

He did not have long to wait. The girl returned and showed him into a small drawing room which was rather dark and sparsely furnished. Two portraits, one of Professor Valerius, the other of M. Daaé, hung on opposite walls.

'Madame says she is very sorry', she began, 'but she is only able to receive the Viscount in her bedroom. These days her legs are too weak to stand on.'

Five minutes later, Raoul was shown into a dimly lit room where he made out at once, in a shadowy alcove, the kindly face of Christine's benefactress. Mme Valerius's hair was now quite white but her eyes had grown no older: on the contrary, they had never been so clear, so bright, so childlike.

'Monsieur de Chagny!' she said happily and held out both hands to her visitor, 'It was Heaven that brought you here!… Now we can speak of *her*.'

This last sentence struck an ominous note in the young man's ears. He came directly to the point:

'Madame Valerius, where is Christine?'

The old lady answered calmly:

'She's with her "friendly spirit" of course!'

'What friendly spirit?' asked Raoul miserably.

'The *Angel of Music*, of course!'

Disconcerted, the Viscount de Chagny sat down heavily in a chair. Really? Christine was with the *Angel of Music*! From her bed, Mme Valerius smiled and, putting one finger to her lips, intimated the need for discretion.

'You mustn't tell anyone!'

'You can count on me!' said Raoul without knowing exactly what he was promising, for his thoughts about Christine, already very confused, were growing more chaotic. He felt everything begin to spin around him, around the room, around the extraordinarily doughty old lady with white hair and pale blue eyes, the blue of empty skies.

'You can count on me!' said Raoul again.

'Oh, I know! I know!' she said with a merry laugh. 'But come closer, like you used to when you were a little boy. Give me your hand the way you did when you told me the story of little Lotte which M. Daaé had just told you. Oh, I am very fond of you, Monsieur Raoul. And so is Christine!'

'… Fond of me?' he sighed.

He was having difficulty getting his thoughts round the *spirit* Mme Valerius had mentioned, the *Angel* Christine had told him about so strangely, the *death's head* he'd half-glimpsed in a nightmarish encounter on the steps of the high altar of Perros church, and the *Phantom of the Opera*, rumours of whose existence had reached him one evening when he'd lingered on the stage next to a group of scene-shifters who were talking about the corpse-like spectre described by Joseph Buquet before he had been found mysteriously hanged.

'What makes you think', he asked in a whisper, 'that she is fond of me?'

'She used to talk about you every day!'

'Really? And what did she say?'

'She said you told her you loved her!'

And the sweet old lady burst out laughing, revealing all her teeth which she had always carefully looked after. Raoul stood up, his face flushed and feeling very unhappy.

'What's this?… Where are you going?… Won't you sit down?… Do you think you can leave just like that?… If you're angry because I laughed, I'm sorry… After all, what's happened is not your fault… You weren't to know… You're young… Did you think Christine was free?…'

'Christine is engaged to be married?' said Raoul, who was barely able to speak.

'No, of course not!… You know very well that even if she wanted to, Christine could never marry!…'

'What! I know no such thing!… And why can't she marry?'

'Because of the *Angel of Music*!'

'Not him again!'

'He forbids it!…'

'He forbids it?… The Angel of Music won't let her marry!…' Raoul leaned over Mme Valerius, with his jaw thrust forward, as though he were about to bite her head off. Had he wanted to eat her alive he could not have glared at her more fiercely. There are times when minds can be too innocent, and then they seem so monstrous as to be hateful. Raoul considered that Mme Valerius was too innocent by half.

She did not even notice his baleful eyes on her and chatted on quite naturally:

'Yes, forbids it… though not in so many words… What he actually said is that if she got married, he wouldn't have anything more to do with her… That's all!… Also that he'd go away for ever!… You'll appreciate that she won't let the *Angel of Music* go, it's only natural.'

'You're right,' said Raoul in a subdued whisper, 'quite natural.'

'Anyway, I thought Christine had told you all about it when she ran into you at Perros. She went there with her "friendly spirit".'

'Really? She went there with her "friendly spirit"?'

'What I mean is he'd arranged to meet her at M. Daaé's grave in Perros cemetery. He promised to play *The Resurrection of Lazarus* there, on her father's violin.'

Raoul got to his feet and, in the voice that won't take no for an answer, said firmly:

'Madame, you will now tell me where this so-called "spirit" lives!'

The old lady did not seem particularly put out by his brashly direct question. She raised her eyes skyward and replied:

'In heaven above!'

Her naivety disconcerted him. Such plain, simple belief in a spirit that came down from heaven each night and dropped in at the dressing rooms of singers of the Paris Opera, took his breath away.

But now he suddenly understood the mind of a young woman raised by a superstitious fiddler and this lady who believed in mumbo-jumbo. He shuddered to think of the consequences.

'Has Christine kept herself pure?' he blurted, despite himself.

'On my hope of Paradise I swear it!' said the old lady who this time seemed outraged by his question… 'and if, sir, you have any doubts on that score, I really don't know why you came here!'

Raoul twisted his gloves.

'How long has she known this "spirit"?'

'About three months… yes, it's three months since he's been giving her lessons…'

The Viscount opened his arms wide in a gesture of despair, then dejectedly dropped them again.

'The spirit gives her lessons?… Where?'

'Now that she's gone away with him I couldn't say. But up to a fortnight ago, they used to meet in Christine's dressing room. It wouldn't be possible here, the apartment's too small. The whole house would hear them. But there's nobody about in the Opera at eight in the morning. No one to complain of the noise!… Do you follow me?…'

'I do! I do indeed!' cried the Viscount and he hurriedly departed, leaving the old lady wondering whether he was entirely right in the head.

As he walked through the drawing room, he came face to face with the maid. For a moment, he thought he might question her. But he thought he detected a faint smile on her lips. He had the feeling that she was laughing at him and left quickly. Didn't he know enough already?… He'd got the answers he'd come looking for, what else did he want?… He walked back to his brother's house in a pitiful state.

He wanted to punish himself, to bang his head against the walls of buildings as he passed. After believing in all that innocence, all that purity! After trying to explain everything by her simplicity, straightforward heart and unalloyed honesty! Now he knew who the 'spirit of music' was, he could picture him! It had to be some miserable tenor, good-looking, who sang with honeyed lips! How contemptible and ridiculous he appeared to himself! What a wretched, petty, insignificant, foolish young man the Viscount de Chagny was, Raoul thought with rage in his heart. And as for *her*, what a brazen and diabolically abandoned creature she was!

Still, racing through the streets like that had done him good by cooling his overheated brain. When he got to his room, his sole thought was to fling himself on his bed and bury his sobs in his pillow. But his brother was there and into his arms Raoul fell like a baby. The Count consoled him like a father, without asking for explanations. In any case, Raoul would have baulked at telling him about the 'spirit of music'. If there are some things we have no wish to boast about, there are others for which sympathy is too humiliating a price to pay.

The Count suggested taking his brother to dinner. If the hurt had not been so recent, Raoul would probably have declined all invitations that night. But, to talk him round the Count had told him that the woman of his thoughts had been seen in the Bois de Boulogne the night before, with a man. At first, the Viscount would not believe it. But when he was given time and place, he stopped objecting and allowed himself to be convinced. Surely it was a perfectly ordinary thing? She had been seen in a carriage with the window down. She seemed to be quietly taking in the icy night air. There was a bright moon, so there was no mistake: it was unquestionably her. As to her companion, he was no more than a vague silhouette in the dark interior of the carriage which had been travelling at walking pace along a deserted avenue behind the stands of Longchamp racecourse.

Raoul changed in frantic haste, determined to forget his troubles by throwing himself into what is called the 'vortex of pleasure'. But he made a poor fist of enjoying himself and left the Count when it was still early. It was about ten o'clock when he found himself in a cab behind the Longchamp racecourse.

It was bitterly cold. The road was empty and bathed in bright moonlight. He told the driver to wait for him in a narrow lane nearby. Then keeping as much out of sight as possible, he started stamping his feet.

He'd been keeping warm by this healthy method for half an hour when a carriage, coming from Paris, turned the corner of the avenue and began moving quietly, at walking pace, towards him.

His first thought was: 'It's her!' and his heart started thumping as loudly as it had on the night he heard the man's voice through the door of Christine's dressing room… Dear God! How he loved her!

The carriage kept coming towards him. He had not moved from his spot. He waited… If it really was Christine, he decided he would grab the horses by the reins!… He was going to have it out with this Angel of Music, whatever the cost!

Another few steps and the carriage would be level with him. There was no doubt in his mind: it *was* her!… And then, a woman's head appeared leaning out of the window. Suddenly it was caught in an aura of moonlight!

'Christine!'

The sacred name of the woman he loved rose unbidden from his lips and from his heart. He could not help himself!… He leaped forward as if he would snatch her name back again, for the moment when it was thrown into the face of the night seemed to act as a prearranged signal: the carriage and horses sprang forward in a great spurt and were past him before he had time to carry out his plan. The window had been shut. The face of the young woman had vanished. And as he ran after it, the carriage soon became a black dot on the white road.

He called her again: 'Christine!…' Answer came there none. He stopped, swathed in silence!

He looked up despairingly at the sky and the stars above. He beat his burning chest with his fists. He loved her! But she did not love him!

He stared bleakly at the cold, empty road, but there was nothing colder, nothing more dead than his heart. He had loved an angel and now he despised a woman!

Raoul, your maid from the north has played you for a fool! Say honestly and truthfully: does a woman really have to have cheeks as fresh and a face as coy and ready to hide under the rosy veil of modesty to be able to drive through the friendless dark in an expensive carriage with a mysterious lover? Oughtn't there to be sacrosanct limits to hypocrisy and lying?… And shouldn't there be a law preventing a woman who has the soul of a courtesan having the ingenuous eyes of a child?

She had driven on without answering his call…

But what had he been thinking of by trying to waylay her?

What right did he have to think he could spring out at her and cast his presence in her face like a reproach, when all she asked was for him to forget her?

'Go away!… Get out of my sight!… You count for nothing!…'

He thought of dying—and he was just twenty years old!

The next morning, his man found him sitting on his bed. He had not undressed and when he saw him the valet feared the worst, for his face was the picture of despair. Raoul snatched the letters he had brought. He had recognized one by its paper and the writing. In it, Christine said:

> '*Raoul: the day after tomorrow, midnight, at the Masked Ball at the Opera, in the small reception room behind the great fireplace in the main lobby. Stand by the door that leads to the Rotonde. Don't mention this meeting to anyone. Dress as a white domino. Make sure the mask hides your face. My life depends on your not being recognized. Christine.*'

09
The Masked Ball

THE letter was spattered with mud and had no stamp. On it was written: 'Please forward to the Viscount de Chagny' and his address in pencil. It had obviously been thrown or dropped in the hope that a passer-by would pick it up and deliver it to his house. Which was clearly what had happened. The note had been found on a pavement in the Place de l'Opéra. Raoul reread it feverishly.

It needed no more to rekindle his hopes. The grim picture he had momentarily formed of a Christine who had abandoned all self-respect gave way to his original image of her as innocent and unfortunate, the victim both of a foolish impulse and her own excessive sensibilities. But to what extent was she, at this point, really a victim? Whose prisoner was she? Into what maelstrom had she been sucked? The questions kept going round and round in his head painfully. But the pain was preferable to the torment of thinking that Christine was a hypocrite and a liar! What had happened exactly? To whose influence had she been subjected? What monster had bewitched her and with what weapons?

And what weapon if not music? Yes, of course! The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that the truth lay there. Had he forgotten how her voice had sounded at Perros when she told him about the visit from a celestial messenger? And surely what had happened to her recently should help him answer the shadowy questions he was grappling with? Had he underestimated her grief for her dead father and forgotten her weary rejection of everything that is life, even her art? At the Conservatoire, she had been no more than a mechanical, soulless voice. Then, all of a sudden, she had woken up, as if she had been breathed on by the divine afflatus. The Angel of Music had come to her! She had sung Marguerite in *Faust* and scored a triumph!… So who exactly had managed to convince her he was a magical maestro? Who knew about M. Daaé's favourite legend and was exploiting it to the point where she had become a helpless instrument in his hands which he plucked at will?

Still, thought Raoul, there was nothing all that strange about such a case. He recalled what had happened to Princess Belmonte who lost her husband: her grief had made her almost catatonic. For a month, she had not been able to speak or shed a tear. With her physical and spiritual inertia deepening day by day, her reason similarly declined and she was gradually heading towards the extinction of life. Each evening, she was carried out into her gardens, but she did not seem to know where she was. Raff, the greatest singer in all Germany, was passing through Naples and enquired if he could visit her gardens which were justly celebrated. One of the Princess's ladies-in-waiting asked the great artist if he would sing from inside the grove just by where she was lying. He agreed and chose a simple song which the Princess's husband had sung to her during the first days of their marriage. It was an expressive, touching little air. Melody, words, the artist's fine voice, all combined to stir the depths of the Princess's very soul. Tears sprang to her eyes… she wept, was saved and remained thereafter convinced that her husband had come down from heaven that evening to sing that old song for her!

'Yes… that evening… on that particular evening,' thought Raoul, 'perhaps on one single occasion… But even the most powerful imagination would not have gone on being fooled if the experiment had been repeated over time…'

Sooner or later, if the dreamy, grieving Princess had returned to the same place every evening for three months she would have spotted Raff hiding among the trees…

And the Angel of Music had been giving Christine lessons for three months!… Oh, he was a conscientious teacher!… And now he had started driving out with her in the Bois de Boulogne!

Fingers clenched, his hand straying to his chest, Raoul dug his nails into his flesh where his jealous heart pulsated. Lacking experience of women, he was terrified at the idea of what Christine was planning for him in the coming masquerade! What sort of fool would an opera singer make of a trusting young man who knows little about love? He felt ill with misery.

Raoul's thoughts kept racing between these extremes. He no longer knew whether he should feel sorry for Christine or damn her, and from one moment to the next he pitied and cursed her. Even so, just in case, he acquired a white domino costume.

At last the appointed time came. With his face hidden by a black velvet mask trimmed with long, heavy lace, the Viscount de Chagny, got up like a white pierrot, felt ridiculous wearing fancy dress reminiscent of Romantic-era mummeries. No man of the world went to the Opera Ball in fancy dress! People would laugh! But one thought consoled the Viscount: there was no way he would be recognized! Besides, his costume and the mask had another advantage: he would be able to move around as freely as if he were at home, alone with his tortured soul and the ice in his heart. He would not need to pretend, nor compose his feature into a mask to cover his feelings: he had one already!

The Ball was an extra event given some time before Mardi Gras to mark the anniversary of the birth of a famous artist who had left a graphic record of the revelries of former times. A disciple of Gavarni, he had immortalized the roisterers of the carnival at La Courtille.* Accordingly it was an altogether livelier, noisier and more bohemian affair than the usual run of masked balls. Various artists had arranged to meet there and they were joined by a cohort of their models and students who around midnight had begun to make a good deal of noise.

At five minutes to twelve, Raoul walked up the great staircase. He did not pause to survey the many multicoloured costumes that filled the length of the marble steps of one of the most sumptuous settings anywhere in the world. He did not allow himself to be detained by frivolous masks, did not respond to their antics and shrugged off the unashamed familiarities of several couples who were already shameless enough. After crossing the main lobby and avoiding a farandole which for one moment had trapped him, he finally reached the room specified in Christine's note. It was small but was crammed with people, for it was where those on their way to have supper at the Rotonde met those who were on their way back after drinking a glass of champagne. The crowd was noisy and happy. Raoul thought that Christine had deliberately chosen this milling throng for their mysterious rendezvous rather than some quiet corner, for here, with a mask, they would be anonymous in the crowd.

He leaned against a door-jamb and waited. He did not have to wait long. A black domino came up to him and gently brushed his hand. He knew it was her.

He followed.

'Is that you, Christine?' he asked, barely opening his mouth.

The domino swung round sharply and raised one finger level with her lips in a gesture clearly intended to mean that he was not to say her name again.

Raoul continued to follow in silence.

He was afraid of losing her now that he had found her in such strange circumstances. He no longer hated her. He did not even think that she had 'anything to reproach herself with', however bizarre and perplexing her behaviour might be. He was ready to forgive, to forget, to grovel. He was in love. Besides, he had no doubt she would shortly give him a perfectly reasonable explanation for her strange absence.

From time to time, the black domino turned round to check if the white domino was still following.

As Raoul, never losing sight of his guide, made his way back through the main public lobby, he could hardly miss, among the crowds, one particular crowd, and in it, among all the groups got up in the most extravagant outfits, one particular group which had gathered around a reveller whose costume, striking manner and macabre appearance were causing a sensation…

It was a man dressed entirely in scarlet, with a huge plumed hat perched over a death's head mask. And a very fine simulation of a human skull it was too! The art students who had gathered round turned him into a great success. They congratulated him, asked which designer, which master-craftsman, who clearly had Pluto, King of the Underworld, as a customer, had conceived, made and painted such a magnificent death's head! The Grim Reaper himself must have posed for it.

The figure with the death's head, the feathered hat and the scarlet costume wore an immense cloak of red velvet which trailed behind him and spread like a fiery royal train over the floor. And on this cloak were embroidered in letters of gold these words which everyone repeated aloud: 'Make way, for I am the Red

Death!…'

One person did not make way… and a skeletal hand snaked out from a crimson sleeve and savagely grabbed the wrist of the offender who, feeling the force of that bony embrace, the demented grip of Death which seemed to have no intention of ever letting him go, screamed with pain and fear. When the Red Death eventually released him, he made off like a madman through a hail of jibes and jeers. It was at that exact moment that Raoul came face to face with the ghoulish figure who happened to turn in his direction. And he was about to exclaim: 'The Death's Head I saw at Perros-Guirec!' for he had recognized it. Forgetting Christine, he was about to spring when the black domino, who also seemed to be gripped by strange emotions, caught his arm and led him away… led him far from the public lobby, away from the frantic crowd among whom the Red Death was passing…

The black domino kept turning round and twice appeared to see something very frightening, for she began to walk even faster, obliging Raoul to follow suit, as if someone was after them.

In this fashion they climbed up two floors. There the stairs and corridors were more or less deserted. The black domino pushed open the door of a box and gestured to the white domino to follow. Christine (for it was she: he recognized her voice) hurriedly closed the door behind him, told him in a whisper to stay at the back of the box and keep out of sight. Raoul took off his mask; Christine kept hers on. He was about to ask her to remove it, when he was taken aback on seeing her put one ear to the wall and listen carefully to what was happening on the other side. Then she opened the door an inch, looked up and down the corridor and whispered:

'He must have gone up to the blind patrons' box, it's directly above this one!'

Suddenly she cried: 'He's coming back down!'

She was about to close the door but Raoul prevented her. On the topmost step of the stairs leading to the floor above, he had just caught sight of a *scarlet boot*, then of another… and they were followed slowly, regally, by the rest of the Red Death's scarlet costume. And again he saw the skull head he had seen at Perros-Guirec.

'It's him!' Raoul exclaimed. 'He won't get away from me this time!'

But Christine had shut the door just as he was about to dash out. He tried to push her out of his way…

'What do you mean, "him"?' she asked in an altered voice. 'Who's not going to get away this time?'

Roughly Raoul tried to brush her aside. But she pushed him away with a strength which startled him… He understood—or thought he understood—and lost control.

'Who do I mean?' he cried furiously, 'It's him! The man hiding under that horrible, morbid get-up!… the evil spirit in the cemetery at Perros!… the Red Death!… That, Mademoiselle, is your friend… *your Angel of Music!*… I'll tear the mask off him, I'll remove mine, and we shall look at each other, this time face to face, with no disguise, no play-acting to come between us, and I shall find out who you love and who loves you!'

He uttered a half-crazed laugh while from beneath her velvet mask Christine gave a cry of anguish.

With a tragic gesture she flung out both arms, making a barrier of white flesh which stood out against the dark door.

'In the name of our love, Raoul, you shall not pass!'

He stopped. What had she said?… In the name of their love? She had never ever said that she loved him, though she'd had plenty of opportunities! She'd seen him very unhappy, begging with tears in his eyes for one kind word of hope which had not been forthcoming!… She had seen him sick, half dead with fear and cold after that night in Perros cemetery! But had she stayed with him when he needed her most? No, she had run away!… And now she was telling him that she loved him! She was saying 'in the name of our love'! Who did she think she was fooling? All she wanted was to delay him for a few seconds… to give the Red Death time to get away!… Their love, indeed! She was lying!

In a voice oozing with adolescent hate, he snarled:

'You're lying! You don't love me. You've never loved me. It takes a silly, miserable, inexperienced youth like me to let himself be played for a fool, to allow himself to be deceived as I have been! When we met again for the first time at Perros, why did you let the way you behaved, the happiness in your eyes, even your silence, encourage me to have hopes?—decent hopes, for I am a decent man and I believed you were decent too, while all you wanted was to string me along!… But you've duped us all! You have shamefully abused the kindness of Madame Valerius who has been so good to you, for she still believes in you even as you flaunt yourself at the Opera Ball, with the Red Death!… I despise you!!…'

He wept hot tears. She allowed herself to be insulted. There was only one thing in her mind: to keep him there!

'One day, Raoul, you'll ask me to forgive you for saying all those horrible things, and I will!'

But he shook his head:

'No, no! You have driven me mad!… And to think that all I ever wanted from life was to give my name to a tart from the Opera!…'

'Raoul!… How can you!…'

'The shame will kill me!'

'No, you must live,' came the grave, broken voice of Christine. 'But for now, goodbye!'

'Goodbye, Christine!'

'Goodbye, Raoul!'

He came towards her, none too steady on his feet, and allowed himself another sarcastic comment:

'Surely you won't mind if I come from time to time and applaud you?'

'I shall never sing again, Raoul!'

'Really?' he went on even more ironically. 'Congratulations! How nice if you can afford not to!… Still, we may bump into each other in the Bois, one of these nights!'

'Not in the Bois or anywhere else, Raoul. You'll never see me again.'

'Might I at least know, my dear, which part of the underworld you're going back to?… Which level of Hell will you head for, mysterious lady?… or which corner of Paradise?'

'That's what I came here to tell you, dear Raoul, but now I can't… You wouldn't believe me!… You've lost faith in me… Raoul, it's over!…'

She said 'It's over!' in such despairing tones that he flinched. Remorse for his cruelty began to gnaw at him.

'But at least,' he cried, 'won't you tell me what it all means?… You are free, you have no ties… You drive around town in a coach… you wear a domino to the Ball… Why don't you go home?… What have you been doing for the last two weeks?… What's all this about an Angel of Music you've been telling poor Madame Valerius? Somebody has been pulling the wool over your eyes, taking advantage of your innocence… I saw it for myself at Perros… but now you know where you stand!… You're a person with a mind of your own, Christine… you know what you're doing… and yet Madame Valerius goes on expecting you back and passes the time waiting for you by sending up prayers to your "friendly spirit"!… Tell me what it's all about, Christine. Anybody would have been taken in just as I was!… what is this farce all about?'

Christine simply took off her mask and said:

'Not a farce, Raoul: a tragedy!'

When he saw her face, he could not suppress an exclamation of shocked surprise. The freshness had gone from her cheeks. A deathly pallor had claimed her features which he remembered as sweet and lovely, the outer reflection of her candid nature and clear conscience. But how ravaged was that face now! Sorrow

had ploughed deep, cruel furrows there and those bright eyes which once had been as blue and clear as the lakes which had described little Lotte's gaze, tonight were bottomless, dark, mysterious, unfathomable and ringed with shadows of unutterable sadness.

'Christine! Oh, Christine!' he murmured holding out his arms to her. 'You said you would forgive me…'

'Perhaps!… Maybe one day…', she said as she replaced her mask. Then she walked away, forbidding him to follow her with a dismissive wave of her hand…

He attempted to run after her, but she turned and repeated the gesture with such imperious authority that he dared not take another step.

He watched her go. Then, with his head throbbing and his heart in pieces, he too went back down to rejoin the crowd not knowing exactly what he was doing. He asked everyone in the rooms he walked through if they had seen the Red Death. They answered: 'Who do you mean, the Red Death?' And he replied 'He's a man in a costume, with a skull for a head and a long red cloak.' Whoever he asked said the Red Death had been there moments before, trailing his royal cloak behind him, but Raoul could not see him anywhere. Around two in the morning, he went backstage to the corridor that led to Christine Daaé's dressing room.

His steps led him to the place where his sufferings had begun. He beat on the door. There was no answer. He went in as he had on the night he had tried to trace the *man's voice.* The dressing room was empty. A gaslight burned low. There was a small table and, on it, writing paper. He thought of writing to Christine, but suddenly he heard footsteps in the corridor outside. He just had time to hide in the alcove which was separated from the main dressing room by a single curtain. A hand pushed the door open. It was Christine!

He held his breath. He wanted to see! He wanted to know! Something told him he was about to witness part of the mystery unfold and that he would begin to understand…

Christine came in, removed her mask wearily and tossed it on to the table. She sighed, let her lovely head fall into her hands… What was she thinking about?… About Raoul?… No, because Raoul heard her murmur:

'Poor Erik!'

At first he thought he hadn't heard aright. He was convinced that if anyone deserved sympathy, it was him. What would have been more natural after what had happened between them than for her to say, with a sigh: 'Poor Raoul!'? But she shook her head and repeated: 'Poor Erik!' Who was this Erik that he should make Christine sigh and why was the nightingale of the north feeling so sorry for Erik when Raoul was so unhappy?

Christine began writing calmly, unhurriedly and so serenely that the sight of her made Raoul, still shaken by the scene which had driven them apart, begin to feel hurt and cross. 'How can she behave so coolly?' he thought… She went on writing, covering two, three, four sheets. All at once, she looked up and hid what she had written in her bodice… She seemed to be listening… Raoul listened too… Where was that strange noise, like a distant rhythm, coming from?… A muffled humming seemed to emerge from the walls… It was as if the walls were singing!… The sound grew stronger, he could make out the words now… he distinctly heard a voice… a very beautiful, gentle, captivating voice… but despite its lyric sweetness it was a male voice, definitely not a woman's… It came nearer, nearer… it passed through the wall… it entered… and then *the voice was in the room*, singing for Christine!

She got to her feet and spoke to the voice as if she was speaking to a person standing next to her.

'Here I am, Erik,' she said. 'I'm ready. It's you who are late, not I.'

Raoul, who was watching carefully from behind the curtain, could not believe his eyes which told him that there was no one else there.

Christine's face lit up. A happy smile settled on her bloodless lips, a smile such as ill patients smile when they begin to hope that the sickness that struck them down will not carry them off.

The disembodied voice began to sing again and Raoul knew instantly that never had he heard any human sound which in the same breath spanned the range of all extremes, never listened to a voice more generously, heroically smooth, more decisively insidious, more silky in its power, more robust in its silkiness, in a word, more overwhelmingly irresistible. In it were tones of absolute perfection which soared masterfully and must, simply by being heard, strike sublime responses from mortals who feel, love and make music. It was a pure, tranquil fount of harmony at which the faithful could safely and devoutly drink, sure in the knowledge that by doing so they were partaking of the true blessings of music. And being brushed by the sleeve of the Divine, their art was transfigured. Raoul listened to the voice in a state of feverish agitation and began to understand how Christine Daaé had managed to appear on stage one night in front of a stunned audience and find accents of startling beauty and unprecedented, jubilant power! She had obviously sung under the influence of this mysterious, unseen master's voice! He also gained a better understanding of that outstanding performance by listening to this exceptional voice which was not singing music of any quality: it was the voice itself which turned dross into gold! The ordinariness of the words and the almost coarse vulgarity of the melody were transmuted into great beauty by the life force which raised them and sent them flying heavenwards on the wings of passion. For though it sang 'the Wedding-Night Song' from *Roméo et Juliette*,* that angelic voice was really singing the praises of pagan love.

Raoul saw Christine reach out her hands to the voice, just as she had done in the cemetery at Perros when the unseen violinist had played *The Resurrection of Lazarus*…

There are no words to describe the passion with which the voice sang:

'To thee my destiny is bound for ever!'

The line was a knife in Raoul's heart. As he struggled against the spell which sapped his will, his energy and dimmed his mind just when he needed all his wits, he managed to draw back the curtain which concealed his presence and approached Christine. She was now walking towards the back of the room where the wall was completely filled by a large mirror. It reflected her image but not his. He was exactly behind her, completely masked by her body, and she did not see him.

'To thee my destiny is bound for ever!'

Christine kept on walking towards her reflection and her reflection came to meet her. Then the two Christines, the real and the reflected, touched, fused and Raoul stretched out one hand to grasp both of them in one embrace.

Suddenly there was a kind of brilliant, magical starburst, Raoul staggered and was thrown violently backwards while an icy wind blew across his face. He saw not two, but four, eight, twenty Christines who whirled around effortlessly, mocking him and fleeing away too swiftly for him to hold any of them in his hand. And then everything went still again and he saw himself in the mirror. But Christine had vanished.

He lunged at the mirror. He leaped at the walls. Nobody! And yet the room still echoed with a distant, passionate rhythm:

'To thee my destiny is bound for ever!'

He put both hands to his damp forehead, flexed his muscles now released from their trance, stumbled through the semi-darkness to the gaslight and turned it full on. He was adamant that he was not dreaming. He had been drawn into some dangerous physical and psychological game which he did not understand and which might well grind him into the dust. He felt rather like a daring Prince in a fairy story who crosses into a forbidden land where he must expect to face the supernatural forces which he has challenged and provoked in the name of love…

Which way had Christine gone? Which way would she come back? But would she come back?… Hadn't she told him that it was all over between them?…

and was not the wall still echoing with *To thee my destiny is bound for ever*? To thee! To whom?

At the end of his tether, beaten, his brain spinning, he sat down on the chair vacated only moments before by Christine. Like her, he let his head sink into his ands. When eventually he raised his head again, tears were streaming down his young cheeks, the real, heavy tears of a thwarted boy, tears which were shed for a urt that was not imaginary but one familiar to all lovers on this earth and it made him ask: 'Who is Erik?'

10
Forget the Name of the Man with the Voice

THE day after Christine vanished before Raoul's very eyes in a sort of blinding flash which made him doubt the evidence of his senses, he called on Mme Valerius to see if there was any news. He walked into a charming domestic scene.

By the side of the bed in which Mme Valerius was sitting up knitting, Christine was busy with her lacework. Never did a lovelier face, a brow more pure or eyes more doe-like ever bend more modestly over a chastely plied needle. The freshness was back in her cheeks. The shadows circling her bright eyes had gone. Raoul did not recognize the tragic face of the night before. If the veil of melancholy which hung over those lovely features had not seemed like a lingering trace of the strange web in which she was entangled, he would never have thought that Christine could possibly be that struggling victim.

She stood up as he came in. Showing no sign of emotion, she offered him her hand. Raoul was so taken aback that he was rooted to the spot, dumbfounded, incapable of moving or saying a word.

'Ah, M. de Chagny,' cried Mme Valerius. 'Don't you recognize our Christine? Her "friendly spirit" has let her come back to us!'

'Dear Mama,' the young woman broke in quickly, blushing bright red, 'I thought we'd agreed never to speak of him again!… You know as well as I do that there is no Angel of Music!'

'But, dear child, he has been giving you singing lessons for the last three months!'

'Mama, I promised I'd tell you all about it some day. I hope I shall… but until then you said you wouldn't mention the subject or ask me any more questions!…'

'Only if you promise not to go away again! But, Christine, you haven't promised that, have you?'

'Not now, dear, it's not a subject that could be of the remotest interest to M. de Chagny.'

'There you're wrong, Mademoiselle,' said Raoul in a voice which he hoped was firm and bold but trembled. 'Anything that concerns you interests me to a degree which perhaps you will understand one day. I won't try to hide the fact that my astonishment matches my joy in finding you here with your adoptive mother. Given what happened between us yesterday, what you said to me, what I read between the lines, I did not expect to see you back so soon. No one would be more delighted at your return than I if you weren't so set on keeping a secret which could well have fatal consequences for you… I have been your friend for too long not to be worried, as is Madame Valerius, about a highly fraught situation which will go on being dangerous until we get to the bottom of it, Christine, for you will certainly end up by being its victim.'

At these words, Mme Valerius stirred in her bed.

'What does that mean?' she cried. 'Is Christine is danger?'

'Indeed she is,' said Raoul boldly, ignoring the signs which Christine made to him.

'Dear Lord,' gasped the kindly, trusting old lady. 'You must tell me everything, Christine! Why did you say everything was all right? What sort of danger, Monsieur?' she said, turning to Raoul.

'A fraud, a trickster, is taking advantage of Christine's good nature.'

'Then the Angel of Music is an impostor?'

'She told you herself that there is no Angel of Music!'

'Then for heaven's sake what is the matter? Oh, you will be the death of me!'

The matter, Madame, is that a very earthbound mystery hangs over you, over Christine, over all of us, a mystery much more terrifying than any number of ghosts and evil spirits!'

Mme Valerius turned to Christine looking very frightened, but Christine had already rushed to her and was comforting her in her arms.

'Don't listen to him, darling… You mustn't listen…', she said as she tried to calm her, for the old lady was gasping and panting as if she were about to breathe her last.

'Then promise you'll never leave me again!' the Professor's widow begged her.

Christine did not reply and it was Raoul who spoke:

'You must promise, Christine… It's the only way to reassure your mother and me! And on our side we swear we'll never ask about your past! But you must give your word that from now on you will stay with us so that we can keep you safe from harm.'

'I don't want you to swear any such thing nor will I promise to do what you ask!' said Christine disdainfully. 'I am a free agent, sir. You have no right to try to control my actions and I would be glad if you would not try to do so in future.* As to what I have been doing these last two weeks, there is only one man who has any right to ask me to account for myself: my husband. But I have no husband and have no intention of marrying, ever!'

She had spoken forcefully. She held out her hand to Raoul, as if the gesture would make her words more solemn. But Raoul blanched, not simply as a result of what he'd heard but because, on Christine's finger, he saw a gold ring.

'You have no husband, but you are wearing a wedding ring.'

He reached for her hand but Christine withdrew it quickly.

'It was a gift!' she said, blushing again as she tried unsuccessfully to hide her discomfiture.

'Christine! Since you don't have a husband, that ring can only have been given you by someone who hopes you will become his wife! Why do you go on lying to us? Why do you keep torturing me? That ring is a promise and that promise has been accepted!'

'That's what I told her,' the old lady remarked.

'And what did she say?'

'The first thing that came into my head!' cried Christine, losing patience. 'M. de Chagny, don't you think this inquisition has gone on long enough?… As for me…'

Raoul, thoroughly shaken, was afraid to give her an opportunity to say anything which would mean a clean break.

'I apologize', he broke in quickly, 'for speaking to you like that, Mademoiselle… I think you know that if I meddle in matters which doubtless do not concern me, I only mean well! But let me just tell you what I saw… and I've seen more than you imagine, Christine… or at least what I think I saw. To tell the truth, it was enough to make anyone doubt the evidence of his own senses.'

'And what did you see, sir, or think you saw?'

'I saw you react with ecstasy to *the sound of the voice*, Christine! the voice which came out of the wall, or from the dressing room next to yours or some adjoining chamber… Yes, *ecstasy!*… And that is what makes me so afraid for you!… Someone has cast a highly dangerous spell on you!… And yet you are perfectly aware that you have been tricked, for you just said that *there is no Angel of Music*… If you believe that, why did you go to him again? Why did you stand, looking radiant, as if you were hearing choirs of angels?… That voice is very dangerous, Christine, because when I heard it I was so spellbound that you suddenly vanished before my very eyes leaving me with no idea where you'd gone!… Oh Christine, in the name of God, in the name of your father who is now in heaven, who loved you so much and loved me too, you must tell me and Mme Valerius whose voice it is!… Then we will be able to save you from yourself!… Come, Christine, what is the man's name?… The man with the gall to put a gold ring on your finger!'

'That, M. de Chagny,' she said icily, 'is something you will never know!'

Thereupon he heard the voice of Mme Valerius who, seeing the hostility with which her ward spoke to the Viscount, now took Christine's side.

'And if she does love this man, Monsieur,' she said sharply, 'that is none of your business either!'

'Ah, Madame,' Raoul went on meekly, unable to hold back the tears, 'I believe Christine really does love him!… Everything points to it. But that's not my main concern. What I'm not sure of is whether the man Christine loves is worthy of her!'

'You must let me be the judge of that, sir!' said Christine. And she blasted Raoul with a look of withering anger.

'When a man intent on seducing a young woman stoops', began Raoul who felt his courage begin to desert him, 'to such fanciful, romantic methods…'

'… the man must be a scoundrel and the girl a ninny, is that it?'

'Christine!'

'Raoul, how can you damn out of hand a man you've never met, who nobody knows and about whom you know nothing?'

'You're wrong, Christine… wrong… At least I know his name which you would prefer to keep from me… Your Angel of Music, Mademoiselle, is called Erik!'

This time, Christine was unable to conceal her feelings. She turned whiter than an altar-cloth and stammered:

'Who told you?'

'You did!'

'How do you mean?'

'You were feeling sorry for him, last night, after the masked ball. Do you remember going back to your dressing room? You said: "*Poor Erik!*" Well, not far away there was a poor Raoul who heard you.'

'That makes the second time you've been known to eavesdrop outside doors. M. de Chagny!'

'But I wasn't outside the door!… I was in your dressing room… in the alcove!'

'You fool!' groaned Christine who reacted with all the signs of utter terror… 'you fool! Do you want to get yourself killed?'

'Perhaps!'

Raoul said the word with so much love and such despair that Christine could not stifle a sob.

She took both his hands and looked at him with all the unadulterated tenderness she was capable of. Caught by those eyes, he felt his unhappiness melt away.

'Raoul,' she said. 'You must forget *the man's voice* and erase all trace of his name from your memory… and never again try to solve the mystery of *the man's voice*.'

'Is the mystery then so very terrible?'

'There is no mystery more terrible anywhere on earth!'

A silence fell between the two young people. Raoul felt utterly crushed by it.

'Swear you'll never try to find out… Swear you'll never enter my dressing room unless I ask you…'

'Do you promise to invite me from time to time, Christine?'

'I promise.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

'In that case, I swear.'

Those were the last words they spoke that day.

He kissed her hand and left, cursing Erik and vowing that he would be patient.

11
Above the Traps

He saw her again at the Opera the following day. The gold ring was still on her finger. She was sweet and friendly. She talked about his plans for the future and his career. He told her the date for the departure of the Polar expedition had been brought forward. He would be leaving France in three weeks or a month at most.

She was almost playful as she tried to persuade him to take a more positive view of the voyage, to see it as a first step on the ladder of fame. But when he told her that fame without love meant nothing to him, she treated him like a child whose troubles never last long.

He said: 'How can you be so flippant about such serious things, Christine? We may never see each other again!… I could die during the expedition!'

'So could I,' she said simply.

She stopped smiling, no longer playful. Her mind seemed full of a new thought which had struck her for the first time. It lit up her eyes.

'A penny for your thoughts, Christine.'

'I was thinking that we'll never meet again…'

'And is that what's made you look so happy?'

'… and that a month from now we'll have to say goodbye… for ever!'

'Unless we solemnly promise to love and swear to wait for each other… for ever.'

She closed his lips with her fingers.

'Don't talk like that, Raoul… You know it's out of the question… We shall never marry, as you well know!'

And suddenly she seemed filled with a joy she could not restrain. She clapped her hands with childish glee… Raoul stared at her anxiously, not understanding.

'But…' she said, holding out both hands to him, or rather giving them to him as if she had decided to make him a gift of them, 'but if we can't marry… we could get engaged!… No one would know but us, Raoul!… If people can get married in secret, why can't they get engaged in secret?… Consider us engaged, dear Raoul, for a month!… One month from now you will sail away and I shall be happy for I shall have the memory of that month for the rest of my life!'

She was delighted with her scheme… Then she was serious again:

'It will make us happy,' she said, '*and harm no one!*'

Raoul went along with her idea. He jumped at it and wanted to start there and then. He bowed most humbly to Christine and said:

'Mademoiselle, I have the honour to ask for your hand in marriage!'

'But you are already holding both of them! Oh, Raoul, how happy we shall be!… We shall so enjoy playing at being engaged!'

Raoul thought: 'She hasn't thought it through! A month will give me time either to make her forget *the mystery of the man's voice* or at least solve it! In a month, she'll say she will marry me! Until then, let's play make-believe!'

It was the best of games and they loved playing it like the unspoilt children that they were. They shared wonderful secrets and swore undying love! The idea that neither of them would be able to keep the promises they made when the month was up put thorns among the roses, made them sad as well as happy. They played 'hearts' the way children play ball, except that since it was their hearts that they were throwing they needed to be very, very careful not to drop them. One day—exactly one week after they began playing their game—Raoul's heart was bruised. He stopped playing for a moment and said rashly: 'I'm not going to the North Pole!'

Christine, so trusting by nature, had never considered this possibility. She realized the game they were playing was dangerous and bitterly regretted having begun it. She did not answer and went straight home.

This happened in the afternoon, in Christine's dressing room where she always arranged their tête-à-têtes around amusing little feasts consisting of cakes and a glass of port, with a bunch of violets on the little table.

That evening, she was not due to sing. He did not get the usual letter from her, though they had agreed to write every day of 'their' month. The next morning, he hurried round to Mme Valerius's apartment. She told him that Christine had gone away for two days. She had left at five the previous evening, saying she wouldn't be back the next day but the day after. Raoul was devastated. He hated Mme Valerius who had given him the message with bovine matter-of-factness. He tried 'to draw her out' but it was clear she didn't know anything. All she said in reply to Raoul's frantic questioning was:

'It's Christine's secret!'

And she would raise one finger and say the words with a mothering sweetness intended simultaneously to urge the need for discretion and to reassure.

'Damn! damn! damn!' fumed Raoul as he ran down the stairs in a rage. 'Any girl would be safe with a harpy like Madame Valerius looking after them!'

Where was Christine?… Two days… Two days cut from their brief allocation of happiness! And it was all his fault!… Hadn't they agreed that he would leave?… And if he had no intention of going, why bring it up so soon? He cursed himself for being so clumsy and was utterly miserable for forty-eight hours, at the end of which Christine reappeared.

And when she did, it was to score another triumph. She rediscovered the amazing form she had shown on the night of the gala concert. Since La Carlotta had got a 'toad in the throat', she had been unable to face an audience. Paralysed at the thought of another *skaark*, she had been left defenceless. The places and faces she associated with the debacle had become odious to her. She found a way out of her contract. La Daaé was invited, as an interim measure, to replace her. In *La Juive*, she was given a tremendous reception.

The Viscount was of course present to hear her. He was the only spectator to sit there feeling wretched while the rest of the audience cheered her new triumph. He had noticed that Christine still had her gold ring on her finger. A faint voice whispered in his ear:

'Tonight, she's still wearing that ring, which she did not get from you. Tonight, she gave her soul once more, but not to you!'

And the voice went on:

'If she won't tell you what she's been doing for the last two days, if she won't say where she's been, you'll have to ask Erik!'

He hurried off backstage and lay in wait for her. She saw him at once, for she'd been looking out for him. She said: 'Quick! This way!' And she took him off to her dressing room, shutting the door in the face of the hangers-on and admirers and leaving them muttering: 'Disgraceful! It's a scandal!'

Raoul immediately got down on one knee. He swore that he would leave as planned and begged her never again to shorten the happiness she had promised him by one single hour. She let her tears flow. Then they clung to each other like a stricken brother and sister who have just heard of a death in the family and meet to grieve for their dead relative.

Without warning, she freed herself from his shy, gentle embrace, seemed to be listening to a sound which he could not hear… and with a brusque wave of her hand, pointed to the door. As he was on the threshold, she said in a voice so low that Raoul guessed rather than heard her words:

'Until tomorrow, dearest Raoul! And be happy!… tonight I sang for you!'

He duly returned the next day.

But they found that her two-day absence had broken the spell which had sustained their innocent game of make-believe. In her dressing room, they looked at each other, not speaking, their eyes full of sadness. Raoul had to make an effort not to stop himself shouting out: 'I am jealous! Jealous!! Jealous!!!' But she heard him all the same.

She said: 'Let's get out of here, Raoul, the change will do us good.'

Raoul thought she was going to suggest an excursion to the country, an outing to somewhere away from that building which he now loathed: it was a jail and, with rage in his heart, he could sense its jailer walking inside the walls… a jailer named Erik… Instead, she led him on to the stage and sat him down on the wooden rim of a fountain in the quiet and rather faded surroundings of the set of the next production.

On another occasion she took his hand and led him down deserted walks in a garden where climbing plants had been cut out by a clever set-designer. It was as if real skies, real flowers, real earth were permanently denied her and she was doomed never to breathe any air except that of a theatre! Raoul hesitated to ask her anything because he soon realized that she could not answer his questions and he did not wish to press her unnecessarily. From time to time they saw a fireman on routine duties, a solitary witness of their melancholy idyll. Sometimes she put on a brave face and tried to deceive both herself and Raoul by extolling the fake charms of some setting designed to stoke human illusions. Her imagination, always lively, painted it in dazzling colours which, she said, nature could not match, let alone improve on. She grew more excited while Raoul gently took her fevered hand. She said:

'Raoul, look at those walls, the woods, the arbours, all these pictures on painted canvas! They have witnessed sublime love invented by poets who stand head and shoulders above other men. Admit it, Raoul: our love has a place among them, for it too is an invention and can never be more than an illusion!'

He was too distraught to answer.

'But if our love is a sad and an earthbound thing,' she said, 'let's fly with it to the heavens above!… It's so easy to do here, you'll see!'

And she led him above the clouds and revealed to him the chaotic marvels of the rigging loft high above the stage. How she enjoyed making him feel giddy by taking him at a run across the flies which she used as slender bridges, among all the ropes that hung from pulleys, winches and rollers, through an aerial forest of masts and yardarms! If he hesitated, she pulled an adorable face and cried: 'Call yourself a sailor?'

And then they would come back down to terra firma, in other words, find themselves in a very earthbound corridor which led them to sounds of laughter and dancing and a scolding strict voice: 'Not so stiff, please!… Pay attention to your pointes!' It was the class for girls no longer six years old but nine or ten… but they were already got up in décolleté bodice, tutu, white tights and pink stockings and strove with all their painful little feet in hopes of being accepted for the quadrilles and one day becoming coryphées, soloists, even *danseuses étoiles* dripping with diamonds… In the meantime, Christine gave them sweets instead.

On a different day she led him to another part of her palace, a large room filled with gaudy military colours, knightly armour, lances, shields and plumes. She inspected the still, dusty ranks of ghostly warriors, had encouraging words for them, and promised that one day they would once again know brilliant, lime-lit evenings when they would march in front of the footlights to an accompaniment of trumpets, drums and applause.

She showed him her realm which was unreal but vast. It covered seventeen floors, from the lowest cellar to the roof, and was inhabited by an army of her subjects. She went among them like a well-loved queen, jollying them along in their labours, sitting a while in workshops, giving good advice to seamstresses whose hands hesitated to cut the rich fabrics intended to dress heroes and heroines. The inhabitants of this country practised every imaginable trade, from shoe smith to goldsmith… They had all learned to love her, for she took an interest in their troubles and knew all their little ways. She also knew about hidden corners where old couples had secretly set up home. She knocked at their doors and introduced Raoul as Prince Charming who had asked for her hand. They sat on worm-eaten stage props and listened to tales of the Opera just as when, as children long ago, they had listened to old Breton legends. The old people had no memories save of the Opera. They had lived there for many years. Managements had come and gone and they had been forgotten; palace revolutions had passed them by. Outside, the history of France had continued to unfold without their noticing and no one remembered them.

And so the precious days passed. By pretending to take an excessive interest in these peripheral matters, Raoul and Christine made clumsy attempts to hide from each other the one thought in their hearts. But this much was certain: Christine, until then the stronger of the two, suddenly became very tense and apprehensive. During their 'outings', she would start to run for no reason, and then stop dead and reach out to hold Raoul with a hand which had gone from warm to ice in an instant. Sometimes her eyes seemed to track imaginary shadows. She would cry: 'This way!' then 'That way!' then 'Through here!', all the while half laughing, half gasping and often bursting into tears. Raoul would try to say something, ask questions despite his promise not to. But before he could frame a question, she would cut him off, saying:

'It's nothing. I swear it's nothing!'

Once, they were on the stage and paused by an open trapdoor. Raoul looked down into the darkness and said:

'You've shown me all round the upper part of your kingdom, Christine… but people tell strange stories about what goes on beneath it… Shall we go down?'

He'd barely finished speaking, when she grabbed him and held him close, as if she was scared he might be swallowed up by the black hole, and said in a trembling voice:

'Never!… I forbid you to go down there!… Anyway, it doesn't belong to me!… *Everything that's under the ground is his!*'

Raoul looked her straight in the eye and said sharply:

'So that's where *he* lives, is it?'

'I didn't say that!… Who told you such a thing? Really! There are times, Raoul, when I wonder if you've got any common sense at all!… You always take things the wrong way!… Now, come on, let's go!'

And she had literally to drag him away because he was obstinate and wanted to stay by the open trap which seemed to fascinate him.

Suddenly the trap shut. It happened so quickly that they never saw the hand that closed it and were left totally nonplussed.

'Perhaps *he* was lurking there?'

She shrugged but did not look at all happy.

'No, absolutely not! That's the trap-men's job. They've got to look busy. They're always opening and shutting the traps for no particular reason… It's the same as doormen. It's how they pass the time!…'

'But what if it was *him*, Christine?'

'No, it wasn't! *He*'s locked himself away. *He*'s working.'

'Really? *He* works?'

'Yes, and he can't be opening and shutting traps and work at the same time. We're quite safe.'

But as she said the words, she shuddered.

'What does *he* work at?'

'Something terrifying! Which is why we're perfectly safe!… When *he*'s working on it, *he* has no eyes for anything else. *He* doesn't eat or drink and hardly breathes for days and nights… *he*'s like a walking corpse… *He* doesn't have time to play around with traps!'

She gave another shudder, then leaned over the trap and listened… Raoul let her do and say whatever she liked. He said nothing. He was afraid that the sound of his voice might break the spell and interrupt the still fragile flow of revelations.

She had not released him… she was still holding him in her arms… and then she murmured:

'*But what if it really was him!*'

'Are you frightened of *him*?' Raoul asked, gently.

'No, I'm not afraid!'

Despite himself, Raoul found himself feeling sorry for her, as we do with an impressionable person who has not shaken off a bad dream. He seemed to be saying: 'Never mind! I'm here!' But the words somehow sounded like a threat and Christine glanced up at him in surprise, as if he were a prodigy of courage and

strength; she seemed to be wondering what value might be put on his bold, chivalrous but quite futile reaction. She kissed him like a sister tenderly rewarding a younger brother for raising his puny fists to defend her against the ever-present dangers of life.

Raoul understood and turned crimson with shame. He felt as helpless as Christine. He thought: 'She says she's not afraid, yet she's shaking as she moves us away from the trap.' It was true. On the next day and the days that followed, they relocated their strange, chaste courtship to the attics, far from the traps. Christine's became more agitated as the days passed until one afternoon, she arrived very late, her face pale and her eyes red with such obvious despair that Raoul resolved to try every last expedient and stop at nothing. For example, the one he came out with straightaway, '*that he would not leave for the North Pole—unless she told him the secret of the man with the voice*'.

'Hush, Raoul! For the love of God, be quiet! *He* might hear!…'

And Christine's hollow eyes looked all around, searching high and low.

'I will free you from *his* power, Christine, I swear! You'll never give *him* another thought! It has to happen!'

'Could it?'

She allowed herself this momentary doubt—an encouraging sign—as she dragged Raoul up to the top floor of the theatre, far, far above the traps below.

'I will hide you away in some isolated place where he'll never find you. You will be safe. Then I shall leave, for you have sworn that you will never marry.'

Christine took Raoul by both hands and gripped them with extraordinary intensity. But then her anxiety returned and she looked around again.

'Higher!!' she said, 'we must go further up!' and she hauled him higher and higher.

He had difficulty following her. Soon they were under the eaves, picking their way through the labyrinth of roof timbers. They clambered around, over and under flying buttresses, rafters, braces, sections of walls, spars and joists, scuttling from beam to beam as if they were in a forest and were running from one massive tree trunk to another.

Yet however careful she was to keep looking over her shoulder, she failed to see a shadow which followed her as closely as her own shadow, stopping when she stopped, setting off again when she set off and made no more noise than her shadow. Raoul noticed nothing. When he could see Christine in front of him, he had no interest in anything that might be happening behind him.

12
Apollo's Lyre

THEN they were outside, on the roof. Christine moved easily, with practised steps, as light as a swallow. They looked through the empty spaces between the three low domes and the triangular pediment. She breathed deeply as she gazed out over Paris which nestled in a valley grimly steeped in toil. She looked trustingly at Raoul, told him to come closer, and arm in arm they strolled along lead-paved streets and down iron avenues. They paraded their twin reflections in the great tanks of standing water where youngsters from the beginners' class, a score of little boys, splash about and learn to swim in the summer months.

The shadow behind them, still dogging their steps, had emerged too, flattening itself against roofs, growing longer each time it flapped its black wings where iron roads met, skirting the cisterns, silently circling the domes. The hapless couple never suspected it was there when they sat down, feeling safe at last under the high protection of Apollo who raised his mighty bronze lyre to a sky filled with crimson fire.

They were enveloped in a blazing spring evening. Clouds which had just donned the sunset's gift of gold and scarlet glided slowly overhead and trailed their diaphanous robes over the two young people. Christine said:

'Soon, we'll go much further and faster than clouds, to the end of the world, and then you can leave me, Raoul. But when the time comes for you to take me away and I refuse to go, swear, Raoul, that you will make me!'

Clinging anxiously to him, she uttered the words with an insistence that was directed against herself and they struck Raoul forcefully.

'Why? Afraid you might change your mind, Christine?'

'I don't know,' she said, shaking her head in an odd way. 'He's a devil!'

She shivered, groaned and nestled in his arms.

'What I'm afraid of now is going back to live with him—under the earth!'

'Why do you feel you have to go back?'

'If I don't go back to him, terrible things might happen!… But I can't do it!… I really can't!… I know we're supposed to feel sorry for people unfortunate enough to have to live under ground… But he's too horrible! Yet it will soon be time; I've just one day left, and if I don't go to him he'll come looking for me with his Voice. He'll drag me down to his sanctuary, deep underground, and he'll go down on his knees to me, with that skull instead of a head, and say he loves me and he'll cry! Dear God, his tears, Raoul! His tears running from two black sockets! I couldn't bear to see him cry again!'

She wrung her hands in anguish while Raoul, finding her despair contagious, held her close:

'No! You shan't hear him say he loves you! You shan't see him shed those tears! Let's go away!… Let's run away, Christine, tonight!'

And he started to drag her away then and there.

But she stopped him.

'No,' she said, shaking her head sadly, 'it would be too cruel… Let him hear me sing once more tomorrow night, just one last time… and then we'll go. Come for me in my dressing room tomorrow night, on the stroke of twelve. He'll be waiting for me in the dining room by his lake… We shall be free and you shall take me away from here… even if I refuse to go, you must swear, Raoul… because I have a feeling that this time if I go back to him I may never return…'

She added: 'You cannot possibly understand!…'

And she gave a sigh. He had the impression that somewhere at their backs her sigh had been answered by another.

'Did you hear that?' she asked and her teeth began to chatter.

'No,' said Raoul to reassure her, 'I heard nothing.'

'It's awful', she said, 'to be always afraid like this!… even here, where we are absolutely safe… This is our place, my place, high in the sky, in the open, where all is light. Here the sun still burns bright and the night birds cannot bear to look at the sun. I have never seen *him* in the day time… it must be awful for him,' she stammered to Raoul with a wild look in her eyes. 'Oh, the first time I saw *him!*… I thought *he* would die!'

'Why?' asked Raoul, genuinely frightened by the direction her strange and alarming confession was taking, 'why did you think *he* would die?'

'BECAUSE I HAD SEEN HIM!!!'

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This time, Christine and Raoul turned round together.

'Did you hear that? There's someone there and he's in pain!' said Raoul, 'maybe he's been hurt…'

'It's no use asking me, I couldn't say,' admitted Christine. '*Even when he isn't there my ears are full of his sighs.* But if you did hear something…'

They stood up and looked all round them… But they were alone on the great lead roof. They sat down again and Raoul asked:

'Where and how did you first see him?'

'I heard him for three months before I saw him. The first time I "heard" him, I believed, like you, that the wonderful voice which suddenly started singing *so close to me* was coming from another dressing room nearby. I went out and looked everywhere. But, as you know, Raoul, my dressing room is quite isolated from the others. Anyway, I couldn't hear the voice outside my dressing room though it went on being very distinct inside. But it didn't just sing, it talked to me, answered my questions in a real man's voice, except that it was beautiful, like an angel's. I couldn't explain it, it was so unbelievable. I'd never stopped thinking about the "Angel of Music" which poor papa promised to send to me after he died. I mention this piece of childishness, Raoul, because you knew my father and he was very fond of you. When you were little, you believed in the "Angel of Music" as much as I did, so I know you won't laugh or poke fun at me. I still had little Lotte's tender, trusting soul, and being with Mme Valerius was never going to change that. I held my little snow-white soul in both hands and I trustingly held it out to him, offering it to the man's voice in the belief that I was presenting it to the Angel. My adoptive mother was certainly partly to blame, for I made no attempt to hide any part of the whole baffling business from her. She was the first to tell me: "It must be the Angel; anyway, you can always ask him." Which is what I did. The voice said it was indeed the Angel of Music I was expecting because my father had promised on his deathbed to send him. From then on, a special closeness sprang up between the voice and me, and I trusted it completely. It said it had come down to earth to teach me the ineffable joys of Art which never dies and asked if I would let it give me singing lessons every day. I agreed with alacrity and starting on that first occasion I never missed one of our meetings which always took place early in the morning in my dressing room when there was no one about on that side of the building. What can I say happened during those lessons? You've heard the voice but even you could have no idea…'

'Absolutely not! No idea at all!' agreed Raoul. 'I assume there was an accompaniment?'

'There was, but I never knew what kind of instrument it was. It seemed to come from behind the wall and it was perfect, faultless. And it was as if the Voice knew exactly where my father had got to with my studies when he died and also the simple method he'd used to teach me. As a result I kept remembering, or rather my voice remembered, everything he'd taught me and this, together with the new lessons I was getting, meant that I made tremendous progress which in other circumstances would have taken me years! Bear in mind that I'm not very strong physically and that to begin with my voice had very little character. My low notes were naturally under-developed, the high notes were frankly quite harsh and my middle register cloudy. It was these deficiencies that papa had striven to correct and he had succeeded up to a point. But it was the Voice which finally overcame them. Gradually, I was able to increase the volume of my whole range to an extent I could never have hoped to achieve given that it was never strong to start with. I learned to deepen my breathing but crucially the Voice taught me the secret of developing the chest notes of the soprano voice. To round it off, it lit up its teaching with the sacred flame of inspiration and stirred me to a passionate,

all-consuming, creative fervour! Simply by talking to me, the Voice had the power to raise me to its level. It made me as one with its towering epiphanies. The soul of the Voice sat in my throat and breathed its harmonies through my mouth!

'Within weeks I scarcely recognized my own voice when I sang!… I was more than a little scared… For a while, I was afraid there must be some sort of witchcraft involved, but Mme Valerius was most reassuring. She said she knew I was far too sensible to let the devil get his hooks into me.

'My progress had remained a secret between the Voice, Mme Valerius and me. The Voice wanted it that way. Oddly enough, away from my dressing room, I sang as before and no one noticed anything different. I did everything the Voice told me. "Wait and see: we shall take Paris by storm!" I waited, in a kind of unreal trance in which the Voice was in control. And then, Raoul, I caught sight of you one night sitting in the audience. I was so thrilled that I never thought of hiding my delight when I got back to my dressing room. Unfortunately for us, the Voice was already there and it guessed by the way I behaved that something had happened. It asked what the matter was and I saw no harm in telling it about our childhood nor in disguising the place you had in my heart. The Voice was silent. I called it, it did not reply; I begged it but it was no good. I suddenly had a terrifying thought: what if it had gone for ever?… Would to God it had!… That night I went home in a state of near-despair. I threw my arms around Mme Valerius's neck saying: "The Voice has gone! It might never come back!" She was as frightened as I was and asked me to explain. I told her everything. She said: "I've got it! The Voice is jealous!" When she said that, Raoul, I realized I loved you…'

Christine paused for a moment. She leaned her head on Raoul's shoulder and they sat silently for a moment in each other's arms. Overcome by their feelings, they failed to notice, or more accurately, did not detect, only yards from them, the shadow of two great black wings which flattened itself against the roofs and crept so close that by enclosing them in its embrace it could easily have smothered them…

'The next day,' Christine went on with a deep sigh, 'I went back to my dressing room thinking dark thoughts. The Voice was already there! Oh Raoul! It spoke with such sadness. It said bluntly that if I was going to surrender my heart to earthly love, then it had no alternative, the Voice I mean, but to return to heaven. It said this with such genuine *human* pain that I should have suspected something there and then and realized that I had somehow become the victim of my own feverish imagination. But my faith in that spectral Voice, which was so closely associated with the memory of my father, was still whole. There was nothing I feared more than the prospect of never hearing it again. On the other hand, I had thought about my feelings for you and saw that I was running an unnecessary risk. I didn't know if you even remembered me and in any case your social position made any thought of marriage impossible. So I told the Voice, hand on heart, that I loved you like a brother, that you would never be anything more and that my heart was uncommitted to profane love… And that, Raoul, was the reason why I never looked at you during a performance nor when you tried to catch my eye backstage: that was why I never acknowledged your existence… never even saw you!… Meanwhile, the hours the Voice and I spent on my lessons flew by in a state of spiritual rapture. Never had the sounds of music possessed me so completely. One day the Voice said: "And now, Christine Daaé, you can bestow on mankind an echo of the harmony of the spheres!"

'Why didn't La Carlotta appear on the night of the gala concert? Why was I chosen to replace her? I have no answer to these questions, but sing I did… and I was inspired as I had never been before! I felt as light as if I'd been given wings and for a moment I thought my ardent soul had left my body!'

'Oh, Christine,' said Raoul, his eyes moist at the memory of that evening, 'my heart beat in time to every note you sang that night! I saw the tears on your cheeks and I wept with you. How could you sing and cry at the same time?'

'Then everything started to spin,' said Christine, 'I shut my eyes… and when I opened them again you were there, by my side! But the Voice was there too, Raoul!… I was afraid for you and pretended not to know you and laughed when you reminded me of the time you rescued my scarf from the sea!

'But no one can deceive the Voice!… It recognized you!… And it was jealous!… For the next two days, it made my life impossible!… It said: "If you didn't love him, you wouldn't keep avoiding him! If he were just an old friend, you'd just shake his hand as you do with all your old friends… If you didn't love him, you wouldn't be frightened of being alone in your dressing room with him and me!… If you didn't love him, you wouldn't send him away!…"

'"That will do!" I told the angry Voice. "Tomorrow I must go to Perros, to visit my father's grave. I'll ask M. Raoul de Chagny to go with me."'

'"As you wish," came the answer. "But know that I too will be at Perros, for I go where you go, Christine, and if you are still worthy of me, and have not lied to me, I shall play the *Resurrection of Lazarus* at midnight, over your father's tomb, on his violin!"

'And that was how I came to write you the letter which brought you to Perros. How could I have been so gullible? And how, given the increasingly personal nature of the Voice's interest in me, how could I not have suspected some trickery? But I was not in control of myself: I had become its Thing!… And the weapons it had in its armoury were more than enough to fool somebody as innocent as me!'

'But surely,' cried Raoul, breaking in at this point in her story when she seemed to be tearfully protesting the total and utter innocence of a mind too naive for its own good, 'surely you soon discovered the truth?… Why did it take you so long to wake from your horrifying nightmare?'

'Discover the truth!… Raoul!… Wake from the nightmare?… But I only began to have that nightmare on the day I discovered the truth!… No, don't speak!… Not a word!… Forget all I said… but now, when we shall soon leave this heaven and go back down to earth, pity me, Raoul, pity me!… One night, one dreadful night… yes… it was the night when so many terrible things happened… the night Carlotta believed that she had been turned into a hideous toad on stage and started croaking as if she had lived all her life in a pond… the night all the house lights went out and the chandelier crashed like thunder into the stalls… That night people were killed and injured and the whole theatre was filled with groans and screams!…

'… that night, in the confusion, my first thought, Raoul, was both for you and the Voice, for at that point you occupied equal places in my heart. My mind was quickly put at ease at least about you, for I'd seen you in your brother's box and knew you were in no danger. As for the Voice, it had told me it would be at the performance and I was afraid for it, really afraid, as if it had been "an ordinary person of flesh and blood and therefore capable of dying". I was afraid the chandelier might have silenced it for ever. At that point I was on stage and so distraught that I was ready to run into the stalls and look for the Voice among the dead and injured, but then it suddenly struck me that if it was safe, it would already be in my dressing room and would soon put my mind at rest. I rushed back to my room. The Voice wasn't there. I locked myself in and with tears in my eyes begged it, if it were still alive, to reveal itself to me. The Voice did not reply.

'Then all at once I heard a long, wonderful, plaintive sound which I knew well. It was the lament of Lazarus when he hears Jesus's voice and first opens his eyes and sees the light of day once more. It sounded like my father's sobbing violin. I recognized his bow strokes which used to transfix us, Raoul, on the byways around Perros, and it was the same sound which had cast a spell over that night in the cemetery. And then from that unseen, majestic instrument came the joyful hymn to life as I at last heard the Voice singing the commanding, jubilant words: "Come and believe in me! Whosoever believes in me will live again. Walk! Those who believe in me shall not die!"* I cannot describe the effect the music had on me. It sang of life eternal at the very moment when poor wretches crushed by the chandelier were breathing their last… It seemed as if it were ordering me too to come to it, to stand up and walk. It retreated, I followed. "Come and believe in me!" I believed in it, I went to it… I went and by some extraordinary means my dressing room seemed to grow longer and longer as I walked… Clearly it was done by mirrors… for the mirror was directly ahead of me… And then, suddenly, I was outside my dressing room without knowing how I'd got there.'

'What?' Raoul interrupted her. 'You didn't know how? Christine, Christine, you must have dreamt it!'

'But I wasn't dreaming, Raoul! I was outside my dressing room and had no idea how it had happened. You saw me vanish from there once, so you might be able to explain it. I certainly can't!… All I can tell you is that one moment I was standing in front of the mirror, the next it wasn't there. I looked for it behind me… but the mirror was gone and my dressing room was gone and I was in a dark corridor!… I felt afraid and screamed!…

'It was pitch dark all around me. Some distance away, a faint red glow lit up an angle of the wall, one corner of a crossroads. I screamed again. Only the sound of my voice filled the space between the walls, for the singing and the violin had faded into silence. And then suddenly in the darkness a hand took mine… or rather something bony and cold which held my wrist fast and would not let go. An arm trapped my waist and supported me… Filled with horror, I struggled for a moment; my fingers slid along damp stones without getting any grip. I stopped struggling, I thought I would die of fright. In this way I was marched along towards the faint red glow; we stepped into its light and I saw that I was in the power of a man wearing a long black cloak and a mask which completely hid his face… I made one mighty effort: I dug in my heels, my mouth opened to scream out my fear but a hand closed it, a hand I could feel on my lips, on my flesh… and it had the taste and smell of death! I fainted.

'How long was I unconscious? I could not say. When I opened my eyes, I and the man in black were still surrounded by deep gloom. A dark lantern on the floor lit up a running spring. The water flowed directly out of the wall and drained away into the ground near where I was lying. My head was resting on the knee of the man in the cloak and the black mask and my silent companion was carefully bathing my temples, a gesture which, though kind and thoughtful, I found more horrible to bear than the brutal fact that he had just abducted me. His hands were gentle but did not smell any the less of death. I pushed them away weakly. I asked in a whisper: "Who are you? Where is the Voice?" The only answer was a sigh. And then a warm breath blew over my face and vaguely, though the gloom, next to the black outline of the man, I made out a white shape. The black shape hoisted me on to the white shape and to my astonishment I heard a delighted whinny. I murmured: "Caesar!" The animal started. I realized I was slumped on a saddle. I recognized the white stallion from *Le Prophète* which I had so often spoiled with sugar lumps. One night, a rumour had gone the rounds of the theatre to the effect that he had vanished, stolen by the Phantom of the Opera. I believed in the Voice but I had never believed in a Phantom. But now a tingle ran up my spine as I wondered if I was not the prisoner by the Phantom! From the depths of my being I called out to the Voice to save me, for I had never imagined that the Voice and the Phantom were one and the same! Have you ever heard of the Phantom of the Opera, Raoul?'

'Yes,' said Raoul. 'But go on, Christine, tell me what happened after you were put on the white stallion from *Le Prophète*?'

'I stayed absolutely still and let myself be led away… Gradually a strange torpor overcame the terror into which my hellish predicament had plunged me. The black shape still supported me and I made no further attempt to escape. I felt a strange peace descend on me and I thought I must be under the benign influence of some drug. I was in full possession of my faculties. My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness which was pierced at intervals by dim lights… I reckoned we were moving along a narrow gallery which I imagined must circle the whole area of the Opera House which, below ground, is vast. Once, just once, I had previously been down into its depths which are prodigious. But I'd stopped at the third level, not daring to go down deeper into the earth though there were two further levels into which an entire town could have fitted. But the people I'd seen made me turn back. Down there are demons, black from head to foot, who feed boilers, wield shovels and forks, stoke braziers, fan flames and, if you go near them, frighten you suddenly by opening the red-hot fire-holes of the furnaces!… While Caesar calmly carried me on his back through that gloom peopled by nightmares, I eventually made out in the distance, very far away and very small, like objects seen the wrong way through a telescope, the same black devils servicing their red-hot braziers and furnaces…* They appeared… and disappeared… and reappeared as we twisted and turned… And then they vanished for good. The shadowy figure of the man was still holding me in the saddle and Caesar walked on sure-footed and not needing to be led… I could not give you even a rough idea of how long that ride through the night lasted. I only know I had an impression that we were going round and round, going down in a fixed spiral into the very bowels of the earth. Or was it my head going round and round?… I don't think so. No! My head was surprisingly clear! At one point, Caesar lifted his nose, sniffed the atmosphere and quickened his step. I felt the air grow damp and Caesar stopped. The gloom had lightened. We were bathed in a bluish glow. I looked around to see where we were. We had come to a stop on the edge of a lake whose leaden waters stretched away into the distance, into the gloom… But the blue glow lit up the bank sufficiently for me to see a small boat moored to an iron ring on the jetty!

'Of course, I knew it was all real, that there was nothing supernatural about the sight of the underground lake and the boat. But remember for a moment the exceptional circumstances which had brought me to that shore. The souls of the dead as they reached the Styx never felt greater trepidation than I did! Charon himself* was not more grim or silent than the black figure which ferried me in that boat. Had the effect of the drug worn off? Had the coolness of the place been enough to restore me to myself? But my torpor evaporated, sensation returned and with it my terror. My ghostly captor noticed for, with a quick gesture, he dismissed Caesar who ran off into the darkness of the gallery where I heard his iron shoes clatter on echoing steps. Then the man jumped into the boat which he untied from its mooring ring. He took the oars and rowed with rapid, powerful strokes. Under the mask his eyes never left me and I felt their still gaze like a physical weight on me. The water made no noise around us. We glided through the bluish glow and then we were again swallowed up by the dark as we reached the shore. The boat struck solid ground. Again I was carried in his arms. By now I had regained enough strength to scream. And then, I stopped, dazed by light, a brilliant light which suddenly illuminated my surroundings.* I leaped to my feet. I felt strong again. I was in the middle of a drawing room which I thought at first was furnished and decorated with nothing but flowers. They were magnificent but also vulgar, for they were tied by silk ribbons in baskets like the ones they sell in shops on the Boulevards, hothouse blooms like those I used to find in my dressing room after every first night. In the middle of this fragrant, very Parisian setting the dark figure of the man in the mask stood with his arms folded. It spoke:

"'Don't be afraid, Christine," it said, "you are in no danger."

'*It was the Voice!*

'I was as angry as I was stunned. I leaped on the man and tried to tear the mask off so that I could see the face of the Voice. But the man in black spoke again:

"'You are in no danger provided you do not touch my mask!"

'And he gently took me by both hands and sat me down.

'Then he fell on his knees before me but did not say another word!

'Such respect revived my courage. By making everything so clear and bright, the light also gave me back my sense of reality. Extraordinary though it was, all that had happened now seemed part of the world of mortal, visible, palpable things. The wall hangings, the furniture, torches and vases, even the tasteless flowers in their gilt baskets—I knew exactly where they'd come from and how much they had cost—limited my imagination to a drawing room as pedestrian and unsurprising as many others, though they could never be accused of being located in the bowels of the Opera House. I was very probably dealing with some deranged eccentric who for some reason had ended up in its deepest cellars as a last resort, just as many others, with the silent complicity of the management, had made permanent homes in the attics of that modern Tower of Babel where men and women plotted and sang in many languages and loved in every tongue known to humankind.

'Only then did it dawn on me that the Voice—I had recognized it under the mask which had not muffled or hidden it—*was there, kneeling on the ground before me. And it was the Voice of a Man!*

'I hardly gave any thought to my desperate situation, I did not even wonder what would become of me and what dark, coldly tyrannical purpose had led me to this room, like a prisoner to a cell or a slave to a harem. No, no, no! I told myself: the Voice is merely a Man! And I began to cry.

'The man, still on his knees, clearly understood the meaning of my tears, for he said:

"'It's true, Christine!… I am not an angel nor a genie nor a ghost… I am Erik!'"

Once more, Christine paused in her tale, for both young people thought they'd heard the echo again, behind them, of the name 'Erik!'… An echo?… they both turned round and suddenly saw that night had fallen. Raoul began to get to his feet, but Christine held him back, kept him close to her:

'Don't go! You must hear the rest of it here!'

'Why here, Christine? The night is chilly. You'll catch cold.'

'All we have to fear are trapdoors, Raoul. Here we're on top of the world. There are no traps up here… besides, *he* won't allow me to see you outside the theatre… This is no time to cross him… We mustn't arouse his suspicions…'

'Christine! Christine! Something tells me it would be a mistake to wait until tomorrow evening… We should go now, tonight!…'

'I told you: if he doesn't hear me sing tomorrow night, he'd never get over it.'

'It must be difficult not to want to hurt Erik and also to want to escape from him for ever…'

'You're right to say that, Raoul… because if I go it will kill him…'

Christine added in a muffled whisper: 'But it cuts both ways… because if we run away he might kill us…'

'Does he love you that much?'

'There's no crime he wouldn't commit for me!'

'But he must live somewhere… We could try to find him. If Erik is not a ghost, we can talk to him and make him see reason!'

Christine shook her head:

'No, no! No one can do anything to stop Erik!… All we can do is run!…'

'But if you were able to run away, why did you go back to him?'

'Because I have no choice… And you will understand why when you know the way I left him…'

'Oh! I hate him!' cried Raoul, 'and you, Christine, tell me… I need you to tell me so that I hear the rest of your extraordinary love story with a cool head… say: do you hate him too?'

'No,' said Christine simply.

'Then why are you telling me all this?… You love him, it's obvious! Your fear, your terror, it's just another sort of love, the most delectable kind, a kind that you won't admit to,' Raoul explained bitterly. 'The kind that gives you a thrill when you think of it… My, my! just think! In love with a man who lives in an underground palace!'

And he leered at her.

'So you want me to go back to him?' Christine broke in abruptly. 'Take care, Raoul, I told you once: if I did, I'd never come back!'

A deathly silence fell on all three of them… the two young people who talked and the shadow, behind them, who listened…

'Before I answer,' Raoul said at length, slowly and deliberately, 'if you don't hate him, tell me what feelings you do have for *him*.'

'Feelings of horror!' she said… She spat out the words with such force that they drowned the sighs of the night.

'That's what's so terrible,' she went on, becoming increasingly agitated… 'He fills me with horror and yet I don't hate him. How could I hate him, Raoul? If only you'd seen Erik at my feet in his sanctuary by the underground lake. He blamed and cursed himself and begged me to forgive him!…'

'He admitted he had tricked me. He loved me! He gave me his undying, tragic love!… He abducted me for the sake of that love!… He imprisoned me with him deep in the earth for the sake of love!… He respects me, but he crawled before me, he groaned and wept!… And when I stood up, Raoul, when I told him I would go on despising him unless he immediately gave me back the freedom he'd taken from me, then—and this is hard to believe—he offered to let me go… I could leave whenever I liked… He was even willing to show me the secret way out… except… except that he stood up too and I was forced to remember that though he is neither phantom nor angel nor genie, he is still the Voice, for he began to sing…

'And I listened… and I stayed!

'That evening we did not say one word to each other… He took up a harp and began to sing Desdemona's Willow Song* in his manangel's voice. The memory of it, which I had from having sung it myself, made me ashamed. Raoul, there is a power in music which makes you forget everything outside those sounds which go straight to the heart. My appalling predicament was forgotten. There was only the Voice which lived once more. Entranced, I followed its harmonies wherever they led and became one of the flock of Orpheus!* He took me through pain and pleasure, martyrdom, despair and joy to death and ecstatic, star-blessed love… I listened… He went on singing… He sang melodies unknown to me… He introduced me to a new kind of music which left me with strange feelings of calm, stillness and peace… music which raised up my soul, gently let it down and drew it into the land of dreams.

'I must have fallen asleep. When I woke I was alone on an ottoman in a small, simply appointed room. There was a plain mahogany bed, the walls were hung with Jouy toile* and an oil lamp burned on the marble top of an old Louis-Philippe chest of drawers. What were these new surroundings?… I rubbed my eyes hoping to chase away a bad dream… But I soon discovered that this was no dream! I was a prisoner and the only door led to a well-equipped bathroom with abundant hot and cold running water. Returning to the bedroom, I saw a note on the chest of drawers. It was written in red ink. It explained my predicament fully and, though it was hardly necessary, removed any lingering doubts about the reality of what had happened. It said:

> "'My dear Christine,
>
> "'You have no need to be alarmed about your situation. You have no better or more respectful friend in the world than myself. At present you are alone in this place which you should regard as your own. I am going out to the shops to buy whatever clothes you might need."

"'Oh my God!" I exclaimed aloud, "I've fallen into the clutches of a madman! What's going to happen to me? How long does this maniac think he can keep me locked up here in his underground prison?"

'I ran round my little apartment like a mad thing but failed to find the way out I was looking for. I reproached myself bitterly for being so stupid and gullible and took grim pleasure in scolding myself for being so foolish as to believe that what I heard coming through a wall was actually the voice of the Angel of Music!… When you're that naive, you can expect the worst and deserve all you get! I wanted to kick myself and started laughing and crying at the same time for being a fool. It was in that state that Erik found me when he returned.

'He knocked quietly three times on the wall, then entered coolly through a door I had failed to find. He left it open behind him. He was loaded with boxes and packages which he put down unhurriedly on my bed while I told him a few home truths and ordered him to remove his mask if it really did, as he said, conceal the face of a gentleman.

'Unruffled, he said:

"'You will never see Erik's face!"

'He spoke to me sharply saying that I was not presentable, though it was late: two in the afternoon as he pointed out tartly. He gave me half an hour to finish dressing and, as he spoke, he carefully wound up my pocket watch and set the correct time. He then said I was to join him in the dining room where he promised that an excellent lunch would be waiting for us. I was ravenous. I slammed the door in his face and went into the bathroom. Before taking my bath, I found a magnificent pair of scissors and kept it within arm's reach, for I had made up my mind I would kill myself if Erik, now that he'd stopped acting like a lunatic, also stopped behaving like a gentleman. The cool water was refreshing and when I rejoined Erik I had taken the wise decision not to antagonize or cross him in any way but, if it came to it, to flatter him if it meant being released sooner. It was he who spoke first, about the plans he had for me. He set them out in detail, to put my mind at rest, he said. He enjoyed my company too much to be separated from me, as he had agreed the previous night when I had made my feelings clear. But now I must understand that I had no reason to be frightened of seeing him at such close quarters. He loved me, but he would never say so without my consent and the rest of the time would be devoted to music.

"'What do you mean by the rest of the time?" I asked.

'He answered decisively:

"'Five days."

"'And afterwards, I will be free to go?"

"'Absolutely free, Christine, for once these five days have passed, you will have learned not to be afraid of me ever again. And then, from time to time, you'll come back to see poor Erik!…"

'The way he said these last words affected me greatly. I felt I was in the presence of despair so real, so heartbreaking that as I looked at the mask I felt truly sorry for him. I couldn't see his eyes behind it and this did nothing to reduce the peculiar feeling which came from having a conversation with a mysterious square of black silk. But under the fabric, along the hem, two, three, four tears formed.

'Wordlessly he motioned me to sit down opposite him at the small table in the middle of the room where he had played the harp for me the evening before. I sat down, feeling very uneasy. Still, my appetite was good and I managed a few prawns, a chicken wing and a glass of Tokai wine which he said he had brought back personally from the cellars at Königsberg where Falstaffused to drink.* Erik himself did not eat anything and drank nothing. I asked what nationality he was

and if the name Erik had a Scandinavian connection. He said he had neither name nor country and that he'd chosen the name Erik at random.* I asked why, since he loved me, he had found no other way of letting me know than dragging me down and shutting me away deep under the ground!

"'It's not easy", I said, "to make someone love you in a tomb."

"'We must seize", he said in a strange voice, "our opportunities whenever they arise."

'Then he stood up saying he wanted to do the honours by showing me round his home. He offered me, not his whole hand, just the tips of his fingers. But I quickly pulled mine away from his and as I did so I screamed, for what I had touched was at once cold, damp and bony and I remembered that his hands smelled of death.

"'I'm so sorry," he said with a moan.

'Then he opened a door for me.

"'This is my bedroom," he said. "It's not without interest… Would you like to see it?"

'I did not hesitate. His manner, his words, his general attitude told me I could trust him… and besides I felt that there was nothing to be afraid of.

'So I went in. I thought I had stepped into a funeral parlour. The walls were hung with black but instead of the white motifs which complete the usual effect I saw a huge musical stave and the repeated notes of the *Dies Irae*.* In the centre of the room was a raised canopy from which hung curtains of coarse red brocade. Beneath this canopy was an open coffin.

'When I saw it, I recoiled.

"'This is where I sleep," said Erik. "We must get used to everything in this life, even eternity."

'I found the sight so macabre that I looked away. My eye fell on the keyboard of an organ which filled one entire wall. On the music stand was a manuscript book full of notations in red. I asked if I might look at it and read on page one: *Don Juan Triumphant.*

"'Yes," he said, "I do a little composing. I started on that particular work twenty years ago. When it's finished, I will get into the coffin there with it and never wake again."

"'Then you must work on it as little as possible," I said.

"'Sometimes I work at it day and night for two weeks without stopping. For all that time I am sustained by nothing except music; and then I may rest for years on end."

"'Would you play me something from your *Don Juan Triumphant*?" I asked, thinking he would like that despite my reluctance to linger in his hall of death.

"'You must never ask that," he answered soberly. "My *Don Juan* does not use a Lorenzo Da Ponte libretto, nor is it marred by drink, carnal love and vice in order to show them ultimately punished by God.* I will play Mozart's *Don Juan* for you if that is what you wish. Oh, it will make you cry and give you respectable, God-fearing thoughts. But my Don is never licked by the flames of heavenly wrath, yet he burns, Christine, he *burns!*"

'With that, we returned to the drawing room which we'd left a few moments before. It was then I realized that there were no mirrors anywhere in these rooms. I was about to comment on this when Erik sat down at the piano and said:

"'You see, Christine, there is a kind of music so terrible that it consumes whoever approaches it. You have not yet discovered that sort of music, fortunately for you, for it would wipe the bloom from your cheek and no one would know you when you returned to Paris. Let us sing something from the repertoire, Christine Daaé."

'He repeated: "We shall sing something from the *repertoire*, Christine Daaé," as if it were an insult.

'But there was no time to linger over what meaning I should attach to the way he pronounced the word. We went straight into the duet from *Otello*, when the tragedy is—and was—about to be enacted. This time, he left the role of Desdemona to me. I sang with such fear and desperation as I had never attained before because my feelings were only too real. Singing so close to such a partner did not overwhelm me but raised me to exalted new heights of despair. The events of which I was the victim brought me peculiarly close to the mind of the composer and I found notes which would have astounded him. As for Erik, his voice was explosive. All his pent-up malignant bitterness crept into every sound it made and increased its awesome power. Love, jealousy, hate erupted around us in heart-stopping salvoes. Erik's black mask made me think of the natural mask of the Moor of Venice: he *became* Otello. I thought he would strike me down, that I would die by his dagger… yet I made no attempt to run away, to avoid his fury as the timid Desdemona does. On the contrary, I moved closer to him, drawn, fascinated, discovering the attractions death can have in the midst of true passion… But before I died, I wanted the last thing I ever saw to be the sublime image of those unknown features which must surely now be transfigured by the fires of eternal art. I wanted to see the *face of the Voice* and instinctively, with a movement of my hand over which I had no control, for I was no longer mistress of my actions, my darting fingers snatched the mask away.

'Oh! Horror!… Horror!… Horror!…'

Christine paused, remembering the sight. She raised both her trembling hands and seemed to be fending off the memory while all around the echoes of the night which had repeated the name of Erik now thrice reiterated her cry: 'Horror! Horror! Horror!' Raoul and Christine, brought even closer to each other by the sheer terror of her story, looked up at the stars which shone down out of a still, clear sky.

Raoul said:

'It's strange, Christine, but this quiet, balmy night seems full of the sound of sorrow. It's almost as if it's sighing with us!'

She answered: 'You'll soon know the rest of the mystery and then your ears, like mine, will overflow with the sound of sorrow!'

She clasped Raoul's protective hands in hers and only after a long fit of shaking was she able to continue:

'If I live to be a hundred, I shall never forget the inhuman scream he uttered, his howl of hellish pain and fury, while my eyes, round with horror, remained fixed on that ghastly… *thing*… and my mouth stayed open but no words came out of it!

'Oh Raoul! That thing! I could not stop looking at it! My ears are permanently full of his howling and my eyes will always be haunted by his face! Such a sight! How can I forget it? How can I describe it for you?… Raoul, you have seen dead men's skulls desiccated by the passage of time. And even if you've never had a truly terrifying nightmare in your life, you saw his death's head mask that night at Perros. You also saw the Red Death prowling through the masked ball at the Opera! But none of those death's heads moved and their dumb monstrousness was still and fixed: they were not alive! So imagine if you can the mask of Death itself suddenly coming to life and with its four black holes of eyes, nose and mouth expressing boundless rage, the implacable fury of a demon, *but all with no expression in its black eye sockets*, for, as I later discovered, you can only see his smouldering eyes in the deepest darkness… Imagine the scene: me pressed back against the wall, the picture of terror, and he, the personification of all that is foul!

'He came up close and I heard his teeth grind for his mouth had no lips! I sank on to my knees while, in a voice full of hate, he hissed deranged words and incoherent phrases, he cursed and raved wildly… and what else besides?

'He leaned over me. "Look at me," he cried. "You wanted to see! Go on! Feast your eyes! Gorge your soul on my cursed ugliness! Behold the face of Erik! Now you have seen the face of the Voice. Wasn't hearing me enough for you? Oh no, you wanted to know what I looked like. You women are so inquisitive!"

'He began to laugh and kept repeating: "You women are too curious by half!" with a snarling, raw, raging, fearsome glee… He went on talking wildly:

"'Are you satisfied? I make a handsome specimen, don't I?… Once a woman has seen me, as you have, she is mine! She loves me for ever! Oh, I'm definitely the Don Juan type!"

'And drawing himself up to his full height, he stood hands on hips, rolling the hideous object that was his head on his shoulders, and cried:

"'Look at me! *I am Don Juan Triumphant!*"

'I turned my head away, begging for mercy, but he roughly twisted it back to him by my hair in which his dead man's fingers were entwined.'

'Enough, enough!' broke in Raoul. 'I'll kill him! I'll kill him! For God's sake, Christine, tell me: *where is his secret house by the lake?* I must kill him!'

'Hush, Raoul! If you want to know, let me speak!'

'Oh, I want to know all right, but I also want to know how and why you went back! That's the real puzzle, Christine! Have a care, for it's the only mystery! But whatever happens now, I'll kill him!'

'Raoul! Listen to me! If you want to know, listen! He dragged me by the hair and then… next… Oh what happened next was even more horrible!'

'Tell me, tell me now!' cried Raoul wildly. 'Out with it!'

'Well, he hissed: "Frighten you, do I? Maybe I do!… Maybe you think I'm still wearing a mask, eh? That this… my… my head is a mask? Well, then," and he began to shout, "pull it off like you did the other one. Come on! Do it again! I insist! Use your hands! Both of them!… Give me your hands… if they're not up to it, you can borrow mine… and we'll pull it off together!" I rolled up into a ball at his feet but he grabbed both my hands, Raoul… and dug them into the horror that was his face… and raked his flesh with my nails, his loathsome dead flesh!

'"Listen and learn!" he cried from deep in his chest which heaved like a blacksmith's bellows. '"Learn that I am made entirely of Death!… from head to foot!… that you are loved by a corpse who adores you and will never leave you again! Ever!… I shall make a bigger coffin, Christine, for later, when we have come to the end of loving!… Ah! See? I'm not laughing now, I'm crying… weeping for you, Christine, who pulled off my mask and *can therefore never leave me again!*… As long as you could think I was handsome, Christine, you might have come back… I knew you would come back… But now that you've seen me in all my ugliness, you'll go and never return!… So I intend to keep you here!!!… Oh why did you want to see me? Foolish, unthinking Christine who was so determined to see me when my father never saw me nor ever wanted to!… even my own mother, to avoid seeing me, wept as she presented me with my first mask!"

'By now he'd let go of me and, racked by fits of sobbing, was dragging himself across the floor. Like some disgusting reptile, he squirmed and crawled away, went into his bedroom, closed the door and I was left alone with my horror and my thoughts, but at least freed of the sight of the *thing*. Utter silence, the silence of the grave, followed the storm and I had time to ponder the dire consequences of my action in tearing off his mask. The monster's parting words were crystal clear. I had closed a prison door on myself for ever and the sole reason for my predicament was my own curiosity. He had given me plenty of warning… He'd told me repeatedly that I was in no danger as long as I did not touch his mask and I had touched it! I cursed my folly but admitted with a sinking heart that what the monster had said was absolutely right. Yes, I would certainly have returned if I hadn't seen his face… He had made me feel sad, concerned for him, even sorry for the tears he shed behind his mask and I was not deaf to what he'd asked. Nor was I ungrateful. Even in the impossible situation in which he'd now put me, I could not forget that he was the Voice who had awakened mine. I would have returned. But now, if I ever escaped from these catacombs, I would never come back! No one willingly goes back to be shut up in a tomb with a corpse who loves you!

'By certain crazed things he had done during that terrible scene, his way of looking at me or rather of bringing those two dark, eyeless eye sockets so very close, I had got some idea of the wildness of his feelings. He had not touched me, though I was in no position to resist, and this I took to mean that the monster was also part angel and perhaps he really was, to some degree, an angel, the Angel of Music—and might have been all angel if God had clothed him in beauty instead of putrescence!

'By now, tormented by thoughts of the fate that awaited me, terrified that the door of the coffin room would open and I would see the bare face of the monster, I had gone quietly back to my own room to get the scissors which could put an end to my unspeakable fate… when I heard the sound of the organ.

'It was then, Raoul, that I began to understand what Erik had called, with a depth of contempt which had shocked me: "the repertoire". What I was hearing now bore no relationship to the opera music which had delighted me until then. To begin with, his *Don Juan Triumphant* (for I was in no doubt that he had gone to his masterpiece to escape the sheer horror of that moment), his *Don Juan* sounded to me like a long, wrenching, magnificent cry of distress into which Erik had poured all his doomed unhappiness.

'I recalled the manuscript book filled with red notes and could easily imagine that such music had been written in blood. It took me on a journey through his suffering, into every corner of the abyss inhabited by *the man with the devastated face*; it showed me Erik banging his poor, hideous head against the shadowy walls of his own hell, avidly fleeing the gaze of human beings to avoid filling them with horror. Stunned, breathless, abject, beaten, I listened to that explosion of gigantic chords *which made suffering divine*. Then unexpectedly the notes rising up out of the abyss gathered themselves into one single, monumental menacing flight, into a turning, gyring swarm that took off into the heavens as the eagle soars towards the sun, and a triumphant concatenation of sounds seemed to set the world on fire. At that moment, I knew that the work was finished and that Ugliness raised on the wings of Love had at last dared to look Beauty in the face! It left me reeling! The door separating me from Erik gave way under my efforts. When he heard me he stood up, *but dared not turn round!*

'"Erik!" I said firmly, "show me your face. Don't be afraid. I swear that you are the most unhappy, the most sublime of men and if from this day forward Christine Daaé trembles when she looks at you, it will be because she is thinking of the wonder of your genius!"

'Then Erik turned, for he believed me, and I too trusted my feelings… He raised his now unfettered hands in defiance of Destiny and fell at my feet murmuring words of love… knelt with words of love in his dead man's mouth… The music now had died into silence… He kissed the hem of my dress. He did not see that my eyes were closed.

'What more can I tell you, Raoul? You now know the full story… It lasted another two weeks… two weeks when I went on lying to him. My lies were as foul as the monster who inspired them, but they were the price of my freedom. I burned his mask. I played my part so well that even when he was not singing, he would try to catch my eye like a dog that slyly ogles its master. He was all attentiveness, like a faithful slave, and lavished every care on me. Gradually, he came to trust me to the point where he would walk with me on the banks of Lake Avernus* and row across its leaden waters with me in his boat. During the last days of my captivity, he took me out at night through the iron gate in the Rue Scribe which guards the entrance to the passageway under the Opera House. There, a carriage would be waiting to drive us along the deserted avenues of the Bois.

'The night we found you there almost proved fatal to me, for he is fiercely jealous of you. My only way of convincing him he had no grounds for jealousy was to keep telling him that soon you'd be going far away… Finally, after two terrible weeks of captivity during which I was by turns wracked by pity, admiration, despair and horror, he finally believed me when I said: "*I will return!*"'

'And you did go back, Christine,' muttered Raoul.

'I did, Raoul, and I will admit that it wasn't the horrific threats he spoke as he escorted me to freedom that made me keep my word. It was the awful sigh he gave as he gazed at me when I was about to leave through the door of his tomb!

'It was just a sigh,' Christine repeated, shaking her head in sorrow, 'but it bound me to the poor man more tightly than I imagined when we said our goodbyes. Poor Erik! Poor, unhappy Erik!'

'Christine,' said Raoul as he got to his feet, 'you say you love me but it was only a matter of hours after you were free again that you went back to him!… Have you forgotten the masked ball?'

'It's what we agreed… and you should remember that I spent those few hours with you, Raoul… and in doing so I put both of us at great risk…'

'During those hours, I wasn't sure you loved me.'

'Are you still in doubt, Raoul?… Each time I go back to Erik I hate him more… Each visit, instead of calming him down as I hoped, makes him even more obsessed with me!… I'm scared! Really scared!… I'm so afraid!'

'You're afraid of him… but do you love me?… If Erik was handsome, Christine, would you love me?'

'How can you say that?… Why tempt fate?… Why ask me about things I keep hidden deep in my heart, where people always hide their sins?'

Then she got to her feet too, put both her trembling arms round Raoul's neck and said:

'You are my fiancé for one more day. If I didn't love you, I would not offer you my lips as I do now, for the first and last time!'

He kissed those lips. But as he did so, the night which enveloped them was suddenly shattered. They fled, as if running before an approaching storm. But before they disappeared into the forest of attics under the roof, they saw, with eyes filled with fear of Erik, high above them, a great black bird of the night which fixed them in its burning gaze and seemed to hang from the strings of Apollo's lyre!

13
A Masterstroke from the King of Traps

RAOUL and Christine ran for their lives, fleeing the roof where there were burning eyes which could be seen only in the darkest night. They did not stop until they got to the eighth level down. That evening there was no performance, so the corridors of the Opera House were deserted.

All at once a strange silhouette stepped out into their path, barring their progress.

'No! Not this way.'

And it pointed to another corridor which would take them up to the wings.

Raoul wanted to stop and find out what was going on.

'Go! Go quickly!' ordered the shadowy figure which was muffled in a kind of heavy box-coat and wore a conical toque, or ottoman fez.

Christine was already dragging Raoul away and made him break into a run.

'Who was that?' he asked, 'who was he?'

'*The Persian!*' Christine answered.

'What's he doing here?'

'Nobody knows!… He's always hanging around the Opera!'

'You've made me act like a coward, Christine,' said Raoul angrily. 'You made me run away. It's the first time in my life I ever did that!'

'Nonsense!' answered Christine, who was beginning to calm down. 'I'm beginning to think what we ran away from was a figment of our imagination!'

'If it really was Erik there, I should have nailed him to Apollo's lyre just as they nail owls to farmhouse walls in Brittany, and then that would have been the end of him.'

'But Raoul, first you'd have had to climb up to Apollo's lyre, and that takes some doing.'

'The burning eyes managed it.'

'You're as bad as me, ready to see him everywhere. But afterwards, you start thinking. What I took for burning eyes were probably two golden stars as they looked down at Paris through the strings of the lyre.'

Christine, with Raoul in tow, led the way down another level.

'Since you've made up your mind to go for good,' he said, 'I still think you should leave right now. Why wait until tomorrow? Maybe he heard what we said up there.'

'But he couldn't have! I told you, he's working on *Don Juan Triumphant.* He hasn't time to bother about us.'

'But you're not that sure, otherwise you wouldn't keep looking over your shoulder.'

'Let's go to my dressing room.'

'No, let's go somewhere outside the Opera House.'

'Never! Not until we leave for good! It would mean breaking my word and that would bring us bad luck. I promised him I wouldn't meet you anywhere but here.'

'I suppose I should be grateful that he at least gave his gracious permission for that,' said Raoul bitterly. 'Even so, suggesting we play at being engaged was a pretty bold thing to do.'

'But he knew all about it. He said: "I trust you, Christine. M. de Chagny loves you and will shortly sail away. Until he goes, I want him to be as unhappy as I am!"'

'And what does that mean?' asked Raoul.

'That's what I should be asking you. Does being in love mean being miserable?'

'Yes, Christine, if you're in love and not sure of being loved.'

'Are you speaking for Erik?'

'For Erik and me both,' said Raoul, with a pensive, disconsolate shake of his head.

They reached Christine's dressing room.

'Do you think you're safer here than in any other part of the theatre?' asked Raoul. 'If you can hear him through your wall, surely he can hear us.'

'No, he gave me his word he'd never spy on me from behind these walls and I believe him. This dressing room and my room in his sanctuary by the lake are mine, exclusively mine, and out of bounds to him…'

'How did you get out of here into the dark corridor behind the mirror, Christine? Shall we try to reproduce your exact movements? What do you say?'

'It would be very dangerous, Raoul. The mirror might swallow me up again and, instead of escaping, I'd have to go along all the secret passages which would bring me to the lake. Then I'd have to call Erik to rescue me.'

'Would he hear you?'

'Wherever I am I can call Erik and he'll hear me… He told me so. He has many skills. You mustn't think he's just someone who chooses to live underground for his own amusement. He can do things no other man could. He knows things which are unknown in the land of the living.'

'Be careful, Christine, you're turning him back into a spirit.'

'He's no spirit. He's a man who belongs to heaven and earth, nothing more.'

'Nothing more than a man who belongs to heaven and earth!… You don't exactly sound as if you hate him!… Are you still sure you want to leave him for good?'

'Yes. Tomorrow.'

'Do you want me to tell you why I want you to run away tonight?'

'Tell me.'

'Because tomorrow you won't be able to make up your mind about anything!'

'In that case, Raoul, you'll just have to make me go. Isn't that what we agreed?'

'Then tomorrow night it is! I'll be here, in your dressing room, at midnight,' said Raoul soberly. 'Whatever happens, I shall keep my word. You said that after watching the performance he'll go down to *his sanctuary by the lake* and wait for you there. Is that right?'

'Yes, that's where he told me to wait for him.'

'And how are you supposed to get there, Christine, if you don't know how to go "through the looking-glass"?'

'By going directly to the lake of course.'

'What! Through the various levels and cellars? Down stairs and along tunnels used by stagehands and service staff? How would you manage to keep your route secret? All those people would follow Christine Daaé and when she reached the lake she'd have a crowd of thousands in tow!'

Christine produced a box from which she took a large key and showed it to Raoul.

'What's that?' he asked.

'The key to the iron gate in the Rue Scribe.'

'Ah, I see! The key to the passage that leads down straight to the lake! Are you going to give it to me?'

'No!' she said sharply. 'That would mean betraying Erik!'

Suddenly Raoul saw her change colour. A deathly pallor spread over her features.

'Oh God!' she cried. 'Erik! Erik! Be merciful!'

'Sh!' hissed Raoul. 'You told me he could hear you whenever you called!'

But the singer's behaviour became more and more inexplicable. She began pulling on her fingers, grew agitated and kept repeating:

'Oh God! Oh God!'

'Whatever's the matter?' asked Raoul anxiously. 'What is it?'

'The ring!'

'What ring? For God's sake, Christine, pull yourself together!'

'The gold ring he gave me.'

'So it was Erik who gave you that ring!'

'You know it was, Raoul! But what you don't know is what he said when he gave it to me: "I am going to let you go, Christine, but on condition you always wear this ring. As long as it stays on your finger, you will be safe and Erik will be your friend. But if you ever take it off, expect the worst, for Erik will be avenged!"… Oh Raoul! The ring's not on my finger! We must expect the worst!'

They looked high and low for the ring but in vain. It was nowhere to be found. Christine remained very agitated.

'It must have been when I gave you that kiss on the roof, under Apollo's lyre,' she began to explain tremulously. 'The ring must have slipped off my finger and dropped down into the street somewhere! We'll never find it now! And what terrible dangers have we got hanging over our heads now? We must go! We've got to get away!'

'Yes, and we must go now!' Raoul said once again.

She hesitated. He thought she was about to say yes… Then her clear blue eyes clouded over and she said:

'No! Tomorrow!'

Then she rushed out in a state of near-panic, still pulling and smoothing her fingers as if she thought the ring would somehow mysteriously reappear of its own accord.

Raoul went home, extremely worried by everything he had heard.

'If I don't save her from the clutches of that charlatan,' he said aloud in his room as he got ready for bed, 'there's no hope for her. But save her I will!'

He turned out his lamp and lay in the dark, feeling the need to shout curses down on Erik's head. Three times he cried: 'Charlatan!… Charlatan!… Charlatan!…'

All at once he propped himself up on one elbow. His forehead broke out in a cold sweat. Two smouldering eyes had appeared at the foot of his bed. They pierced the darkness and held him in a fixed, baleful glare.

Raoul did not lack courage, and yet he trembled. He reached out one hand tentatively, uncertainly, falteringly towards his bedside table. He found the box of matches. He struck one and lit a candle. The eyes disappeared.

Far from reassured, he thought:

'She said you can only see *his* eyes in the dark. The eyes vanished in the light. But *he* might still be there!'

He got out of bed, hunted around and searched the room high and low. He even looked under the bed, the way a little boy might, and suddenly felt ridiculous. He said aloud:

'I have no idea what to make of this whole fairy-tale nonsense one way or the other. Where does reality end and fantasy begin? What was it she saw? What did she think she saw?'

Then, with a shudder: 'And what actually did I see? Did I really see his smouldering eyes just now? Or was it just my imagination! I'm not sure of anything any more! So I couldn't swear I really saw those eyes!'

He got back into bed and blew out the candle.

The eyes reappeared.

'Ah!' gasped Raoul.

He sat up and stared back as bravely as he could. After a silence which he used to screw up all his courage, he shouted:

'Is that you, Erik? Man, spirit, phantom, is that you?'

Then he thought a moment: 'If it's him… he must be outside on the balcony!'

Still in his nightshirt, he ran to a small cabinet and felt around for his revolver. Gun in hand, he opened the French window. The night was very cold. Raoul stayed out only long enough to glance round the empty balcony before coming back inside, shutting the window behind him. Shivering, he got back into bed leaving the revolver on his bedside table, within reach.

Again he blew out his candle.

The eyes were still there, at the foot of the bed.

Were they between the bed and the window? Or behind the glass, that is to say, out on the balcony? He wished he knew. He also wanted to know if the eyes belonged to a live human being… he wanted answers…

Coolly, patiently, doing nothing to disturb the soundless night surrounding him, he took his gun and aimed.

He aimed at the two, immobile tawny stars which went on glaring balefully.

He chose his target a little above the two stars. For if the stars were really eyes, and if above the eyes was a forehead, and provided he did not miss…

The crash of the shot shattered the silence of the sleeping house… Feet were heard running in the corridor outside. Raoul sat up in bed and waited, his arm straight out, ready to fire again.

This time, the two stars had gone.

Then there was light, voices, and Count Philippe, looking very concerned.

'What happened here, Raoul?'

'I think I must have been dreaming. I fired at two stars that were preventing me from sleeping.'

'You're rambling!… Are you ill?… Please, Raoul, tell me what happened…'

The Count took charge of the revolver.

'No, I'm not off my head!… Anyway, we'll soon find out…'

He got out of bed, slipped into a dressing gown, put on his slippers, took a light from one of the servants and, opening the French window, stepped out on to the balcony.

The Count noticed the clean hole in the glass made by a bullet. It was head high. Raoul leaned over the balcony with his candle.

‘Aha!’ he said, ‘blood!… here… there… more blood!… Excellent!… a ghost that bleeds’, he said with a nervous laugh, ‘is a poor sort of Phantom!’

‘Raoul!’

The Count shook him as if he was trying to wake a sleepwalker out of deep, dangerous sleep.

‘It’s all right, Philippe, I’m not asleep!’ protested Raoul irritably. ‘You can see the blood for yourself. I thought I was dreaming and shooting at two stars. But they were Erik’s eyes! That’s his blood!…’

Then suddenly he added, sounding worried:

‘But maybe I was wrong to shoot. Christine is quite capable of never forgiving me!… None of this would have happened if I’d thought to draw the curtains when I went to bed.’

‘Raoul! Have you suddenly gone quite mad? Wake up!’

‘Don’t start that again! You’d be more use, Philippe, if you helped me to look for Erik… a ghost who bleeds shouldn’t be too difficult to track down…’

The Count’s valet said: ‘It’s quite true, sir, there’s blood on the balcony.’

A servant brought a lamp and by its light they made a thorough search. The trail of blood led along the handrail, ran up a drainpipe and continued along the gutter.

‘Raoul,’ said the Count, ‘you winged a cat.’

‘The funny thing’, said Raoul with a bitter laugh which grated painfully on the Count’s ears, ‘is that I could well have. You never know with Erik. Was it him? Was it a cat? Was it the Phantom? Was it real or was it a trick of the light? With Erik you can never tell.’

Raoul then began saying bizarre things of this kind which may have been closely and logically connected with what was in his mind and followed on naturally from the strange (but either real or seemingly supernatural) tale which Christine Daaé had told him, but they only encouraged people to think that he had become unhinged. Even the Count thought so and later the examining magistrate, after reading the police inspector’s report, was left in no doubt.

‘Who is Erik?’ asked the Count, gripping Raoul by the hand.

‘My rival! And if he’s not dead, I’m sorry for it.’

He dismissed the servants with a wave of his hand.

The bedroom door closed leaving the two brothers together. But the servants did not move away so quickly that the valet did not hear Raoul say clearly and distinctly:

‘Tonight I intend to leave Paris with Christine Daaé!’

Later, these words would be repeated by M. Faure, the examining magistrate. But no one knew exactly what was said by the two men when they were alone.

According to the staff, that night was not the first time they’d shut themselves away and quarrelled.

The shouting could be heard through the walls and the argument always seemed to be about a singer named Christine Daaé.

Next morning, at breakfast, which Count Philippe always took in his study, he sent word to his brother with an invitation to join him. Raoul arrived, grim and silent. There was a scene which did not last long.

The Count: Read this!

Philippe holds out a newspaper, L’Époque,* *and points out an item on the society page. Reluctantly, Raoul begins to read:*

> ‘The big talking-point in the Faubourg Saint-Germain: the engagement of Mlle Christine Daaé, of the Paris Opera, and Viscount Raoul de Chagny. If what a little bird tells me is true, Count Philippe is saying that for the first time in its history the House of Chagny will break a pledge. But since love at the Paris Opera is even more all-conquering than anywhere else, we wonder how exactly the Count proposes to prevent his brother, the Viscount, leading “the New Marguerite” up the aisle. The two brothers are said to be the best of friends, but the Count is deluding himself if he imagines that brotherly love will vanquish love of the other sort!’

The Count (*sadly*): You see, Raoul? Thanks to you, we are a laughing stock… That girl has completely turned your wits with her tales of ghosts.

(Evidently the Viscount had repeated Christine’s story to his brother.)

The Viscount: Goodbye, Philippe.

The Count: So it’s settled, then? You leave tonight? (*The Viscount does not reply*) With her?… You surely don’t intend to do anything so foolish? (*The Viscount remains silent*) I’ll find a way of stopping you!

The Viscount: Goodbye, brother.

(He leaves)

This scene was reported to the examining magistrate by the Count himself, who would not see his brother again that day until the evening, at the Opera, only minutes before the disappearance of Christine Daaé.

For his part, Raoul spent the whole day making plans for their departure.

Arranging for horses, a carriage, a driver, provisions, luggage, money for the journey, planning the route—they were not going by train, to make it harder for the Phantom to follow them—kept Raoul busy until nine in the evening.

So at nine sharp, a four-wheeled berline-style carriage, with curtains drawn and doors locked, pulled up in the rank on the Rotonde side of the Opera House. To it were harnessed two powerful horses driven by a coachman whose face was mostly hidden by the coils of a long muffler. In front of the berline were three broughams. It was later established that they belonged respectively to La Carlotta, who had unexpectedly returned to Paris, La Sorelli and, at the head of the line, Count Philippe de Chagny. No one got out of the berline. The coachman remained on his box. The three other coachmen also stayed on theirs.

A shadowy figure in a long black cloak and a soft black felt hat walked along the pavement between the Rotonde and the carriages. He seemed particularly interested in the berline. He inspected the horses, then the coachman before moving on without speaking. Investigators would later agree that this shadowy figure was Raoul de Chagny. But I disagree, not least because on that evening, as on every other, the Viscount was wearing a tall opera hat which, furthermore, was later recovered. I believe that the shadow was the Phantom who was fully informed about what was afoot, as will become clear.

As it happened, *Faust* was being performed that night. There was a glittering audience. The Faubourg Saint-Germain was out in force. In those days, subscribers did not lend, let, sublet or share their boxes with bankers, businessmen or foreigners. Nowadays, ensconced in the Marquis de This or That’s box (still known as the Marquis de This or That’s box because the Marquis retains all his contractual rights to it), you will find some salt pork wholesaler and his family—and he is perfectly entitled to be there, since he has paid the Marquis for the privilege. But back then, such practices were almost unknown. Boxes at the Opera were in effect private salons where you were virtually certain to meet or see the most prominent socialites who, in rare instances, had a genuine feel for music.

The members of the fashionable crowd knew each other, without being necessarily on familiar terms. But everyone could put names to faces and the face of the Count de Chagny was known to all.

The paragraph in that morning’s *Époque* had clearly had an effect because all eyes were on the Count’s box where he sat alone, looking aloof and quite unconcerned. The female element of the brilliant gathering seemed very intrigued and the Viscount’s absence gave rise to a great deal of whispering behind fans.

Christine Daaé was given a cool reception. The public had not forgiven her for aiming so high. She quickly sensed the hostile mood of one section of the audience and was upset by it.

Regular patrons, who claimed to be up to date with the latest state of the Viscount's amours, did not pass up the opportunity to snigger at certain passages in Marguerite's role. They turned ostentatiously to look towards the Count's box when Christine sang:

'Pray tell me who was that young man,
If he is noble, and his name, if you can.'

With his chin cupped in his hands, the Count seemed oblivious to their reaction. He kept his eyes fixed on the stage. But was he really watching? He looked very much as if his mind was elsewhere.

Christine's confidence was melting away. She shook. She was heading for disaster… Carolus Fonta thought she might be unwell and wondered if she'd last until the end of the act which was the garden scene. Meanwhile, the audience were remembering what had happened to La Carlotta at the end of this same act and the celebrated *skaark* which had temporarily disrupted her career in Paris.

As if on cue, La Carlotta chose precisely that moment to make her entrance in a box facing the stage. She was a sensation! Poor Christine glanced up to see what the excitement was all about. She saw it was her rival. She thought she saw her snigger and that was her salvation. She put everything out of her mind except her determination to score a new triumph.

From that moment, she sang with all her soul. She strove to surpass everything she had achieved until then and succeeded superbly. In the last act, as she began to invoke the angels and began to ascend, she took her captive audience with her and made each one believe that they too had wings.

As she approached the superhuman climax, a man stood up in the middle of the stalls and remained on his feet, facing the singer, as if he too were rising into the air… It was Raoul.

'Angels so pure, Angels bright!
Angels so pure, Angels of light!'

Christine, arms outstretched, her voice ablaze and haloed by the glory of her hair which tumbled loosely over her bare shoulders, sang:

'Transport my soul to heaven above!'

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And then the whole theatre was suddenly plunged into darkness. It happened so quickly that the audience barely had time to give a collective gasp of astonishment, for almost at once the stage was lit up again.

But Christine Daaé was no longer there!… What had happened to her?… By what miracle…? The audience turned and looked uncomprehendingly at each other and then all was chaos. The uproar was as great on the stage as in the body of the auditorium. Members of the cast ran out from the wings to the spot where Christine had been singing only moments before. The performance came to a halt in the middle of widespread confusion.

Where had Christine gone? What magic wand had spirited her away from her many admiring spectators and the arms of Carolus Fonta? You could have been forgiven thinking that her passionate prayer had been answered and that the angels had really borne her aloft, body and soul, 'to heaven above'.

Raoul, still standing in the middle of the stalls, had given an audible gasp. In his box, Count Philippe sprang to his feet. The spectators looked at the stage, they looked at the Count, they looked at Raoul, and they wondered if this curious turn of events was in some way linked to the story which had appeared in that morning's paper. Raoul rushed out, the Count left his box and, as the curtain was brought down, subscribers made a beeline for the door that led to the wings. The rest of the audience stayed where they were, waiting for an announcement and surrounded by a tremendous hullabaloo. Everyone talked at the same time, claiming they knew how it had happened. Some said: 'She dropped through a trapdoor'; others, 'She was whisked up into the flies, possibly a stage effect dreamed up by the new management that went wrong'; but there were also those who detected something more sinister: 'Surely her disappearance and the sudden blackout leave no room for doubt?'

At last the curtain rose slowly and Carolus Fonta advanced to the conductor's rostrum where he announced, in a sober, shocked voice:

'Ladies and gentlemen, something unprecedented has occurred which leaves us deeply concerned. Our colleague, Christine Daaé, has disappeared from under our very eyes and no one knows how!'

14
A Strange Request for a Safety Pin

On the stage there was total confusion. Performers, stagehands, dancers, walkers-on, figurantes, members of the chorus, subscribers all asking questions, shouting, jostling one another.

'What happened to her?'

'She's been kidnapped!'

'By the Viscount de Chagny!'

'No, by the Count!'

'Look, there's Carlotta! She did it!'

'No, the Phantom did it!'

Some began to laugh, especially after close inspection of the traps and stage floor ruled out any possibility of an accident.

Among this noisy crowd three men stood apart talking in whispers and waving their hands despairingly. They were Gabriel, the chorus master, Mercier, the Administrator, and the Directors' private secretary, Rémy. They were standing to one side by a door which connected the stage with the wide corridor leading to the foyer of the corps de ballet. There they stood behind a number of large stage props parked there, locked in urgent discussion.

'I knocked! They didn't answer! Maybe they're not in the office. Anyway, there's no way of knowing because they've got the keys.'

The speaker was Rémy, the secretary, and there was no doubt that he was referring to the Directors. They had given orders during the last interval that they were not to be disturbed for any reason.

'They're not seeing anyone!'

'That's as maybe,' said Gabriel, 'but it's not every day that singers disappear on stage in the middle of a performance!'

'Did you shout that through the door?' asked Mercier.

'I'm going back there,' said Rémy and he set off at a run.

At this point they were joined by the stage manager.

'Look lively, M. Mercier. Are you coming? What are the pair of you doing here?'

'This is something that needs the personal attention of the Administrator.'

'I'm not doing anything and I don't want to know anything until the police get here,' snorted Mercier. 'I've sent for Inspector Mifroid. We'll see what's what when he arrives!'

'And I'm telling you that you've got to go down to the organ pipes right away.'

'Not before the Inspector comes.'

'I've been down already.'

'And what did you see?'

'There was no one there. Do you hear: no one!'

'What do you think I can do about it?'

'You're right!' replied the stage manager frantically running his hands through his tousled hair. 'You're right! But if there had been someone there, they'd have been able to explain how the lights suddenly cut out on stage. But there's no sign of Mauclair anywhere!'

Mauclair was the Opera's lighting engineer, in charge of the gas lamps which lit or darkened the stage.

'Mauclair not to be found?' repeated Mercier, rather shaken. 'What about his assistants?'

'Not a sign of Mauclair or his assistants either! There's nobody from Lighting, I tell you! You don't think', exclaimed the stage manager, 'that Mlle Daaé actually kidnapped herself, without any help? It was all planned and we've got to get to the bottom of it… And where are the Directors? I've given orders that no one's to go down to Lighting and posted a fireman to watch the gasman's office next to the organ pipes! Was that right?'

'Quite right, you've done well… But now we'll wait for the police.'

The stage manager moved off, with an angry shrug of his shoulders, swearing under his breath at his 'lily-livered' betters who hid themselves calmly in a safe corner when everyone else in the theatre was running round the theatre 'like headless chickens'.

But calm was what Gabriel and Mercier were not. They had been given an order which tied their hands. On no account were they to disturb the Directors. Rémy had disobeyed that order but to no avail.

And then the man himself returned from his second attempt. There was an odd expression verging on panic on his face.

'Well? Did you speak to them?' asked Mercier.

'In the end,' said Rémy, 'Moncharmin opened the door. His eyes were like saucers. I thought he was going to hit me. I couldn't get a word in edgeways. He shouted at me, and you'll never guess what. He said: "Have you got a safety pin on you?" I said no. "In that case, stop bothering me!" I tried to tell him that something totally unprecedented had happened on stage… But he bellowed: "A safety pin! Get me a safety pin at once!" An office boy who'd overheard—Moncharmin was shouting his head off—appeared with a safety pin, gave it to him and Moncharmin just slammed the door in my face! And that was it!'

'So you didn't manage to tell him that Christine Daaé…'

'I would have liked to see you try!… He was foaming at the mouth!… All he was thinking about was his blasted safety pin. I honestly think that if one hadn't been brought to him immediately, he'd have had a stroke! No, it's not right! Our Directors are in the process of going mad!'

M. Rémy, the secretary, was not at all happy and he made his feelings plain:

'Things can't go on like this! I'm not used to such treatment!'

Then Gabriel muttered:

'This is another stunt arranged by the P. of the O.!'

Rémy sniggered. Mercier snorted and was about to say something indiscreet… but catching Gabriel's eye which told him to keep his mouth shut, he said nothing.

However, Mercier, whose sense of his own importance grew as the minutes ticked by and the Directors did not appear, could contain himself no longer:

'I'll stir them up! I shall go myself!' he said decisively.

But Gabriel, suddenly grave and sombre, checked him and said:

'Give a thought to what you're doing, Mercier! If they're staying in their office, maybe there's a reason for it. The P. of the O. has got more than one trick up his sleeve!'

But Mercier shook his head:

'I can't help that! I'm going! If people had only listened to me, all this would have been put in the hands of the police long ago!'

And off he went.

'All what?' said Rémy sharply. 'What would have been put in the hands of the police? Cat got your tongue, Gabriel?… Ah I see! You're in on the secret too. Well, it wouldn't be a bad idea if you were to let me in on it too if you don't want me to start telling everybody that you've all gone mad!… Stark, raving mad!'

Gabriel played dumb and pretended he did not understand the secretary's intemperate outburst.

'What secret?' he murmured. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Rémy lost his temper.

'Here, earlier this evening, Richard and Moncharmin were both behaving like lunatics during the interval!'

'I wasn't aware of anything…' grunted Gabriel, becoming cross.

'Then you're the only one!… Do you think I didn't see them?… or that M. Parabise, head of Crédit Central, didn't notice anything… or that La Borderie, the Ambassador, hasn't got eyes to see with?… All the season-ticket holders were staring at our Directors!'

'What were Richard and Moncharmin doing?' asked Gabriel ingenuously.

'You should know better than anybody because you were there!… You and Mercier both were keeping a close eye on them!… And you were the only ones who didn't laugh!…'

'I don't follow you!'

Very cool and tight-lipped, Gabriel raised both arms then dropped them in a gesture which clearly meant that he'd lost interest in the topic. But Rémy persisted:

'What's this new fad of theirs?… *They don't want anyone coming near them!*'

'What do you mean "*they don't want anyone coming near them*"?'

'*They don't like anyone touching them!*'

'Did you really notice that *they don't want anyone to touch them*? That is odd by any standards.'

'So you agree! And none too soon! Furthermore, they've taken to *walking backwards!*'

'*Backwards?* You saw both our Directors *walking backwards*? I thought it was only shrimps that walk backwards.'

'Don't laugh, Gabriel! This is no laughing matter!'

'I'm not laughing,' protested Gabriel, now looking as solemn 'as a judge'.

'Then perhaps you, being a close friend of both Directors, can tell me why during the "garden" interval, when I spotted M. Richard outside the foyer and went up to him with my hand out, M. Moncharmin whispered hurriedly in my ear: "Go away! Clear off! And in no circumstances must you touch the Director!…" Have I got the plague or what?'

'Unbelievable!'

'And a few moments later, when Ambassador La Borderie started making his way towards M. Richard, didn't you see M. Moncharmin thrust himself between them and didn't you hear him say: "Please, Ambassador, please, I beg you, don't touch the Director!"'

'I'm astounded!… And what was M. Richard doing meantime?'

'What was he doing? You saw him! He turned round, faced the other way, *bowed to someone standing in front of him although there wasn't anyone there*, and then left the room, walking *backwards!*'

'Backwards??'

'And Moncharmin, following Richard out, also half-turned round, that is, he did a half-turn, and then he too walked out *backwards!* And they carried on like that until they got to the stairs to their office, *backwards!… backwards!* So if they aren't mad, please would you tell me what on earth is going on?'

'Perhaps,' said Gabriel without conviction, 'they were rehearsing some sort of ballet steps?'

Rémy felt grossly insulted by being fobbed off with such a crude excuse at such a critical moment. He furrowed his brows, pursed his lips and, leaning over, whispered into Gabriel's ear:

'Stop this foolery, Gabriel. Things are happening here which you and Mercier have had a hand in.'

'Such as what?' asked Gabriel.

'Christine Daaé is not the only one who disappeared tonight!'

'Tommy-rot!'

'There's no tommy-rot about it. Maybe you can explain why, when Mme Giry came down to the foyer just now, Mercier grabbed her by the wrist and bundled her out?'

'Really?' said Gabriel, 'I didn't notice.'

'You noticed, all right, so much so that you followed Mercier and Mme Giry up to Mercier's office. Subsequently, you and Mercier have been seen, but no one has had as much as a glimpse of Mme Giry.'

'What? Do you think we ate her?'

'No, but you double-locked her in Mercier's office and do you know what anyone walking past the door could hear? A voice shouting: "Villains, crooks, the lot of them!"'

At that point in this strange conversation Mercier arrived. He was out of breath.

'Well, that's it!' he said glumly. 'It's the bally limit!… I shouted to them, "We've got a serious situation! Open the door! It's me, Mercier!" I heard steps, the door opened and Moncharmin appeared. He was white as a sheet. He said: "What do you want?" I said: "Christine Daaé has been abducted!" And do you know what he replied: "Bully for her!" He slipped this into my hand before shutting the door.'

Mercier unclosed his fist and Rémy and Gabriel stared.

'The safety pin!' cried Rémy.

'Odd! Very odd!' said Gabriel in a low murmur. He could not repress a shiver.

And then a voice suddenly made all three turn round.

'Excuse me, gentlemen, could you please tell me where I might find Christine Daaé?'

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the question was so incongruous that they would certainly have burst out laughing if they had not been looking at a face so stricken their hearts went out to it immediately.

It was the face of Viscount Raoul de Chagny.

15
'Christine! Christine!'

FOLLOWING Christine Daaé's startlingly phantasmagoric disappearance, Raoul's first thought had been to suspect Erik. He was no longer in any doubt that the Angel of Music possessed almost supernatural powers, at least within the purlieus of the Opera House where he had established his devilish reign.

Raoul had rushed backstage mad with despair and love. 'Christine! Christine!' he groaned, not knowing which way to turn, calling her just as he felt she must now be calling him from the depths of the darkness where the monster had taken her, like a beast with its prey, still trembling in saint-like ecstasy, still robed in the white shroud she was wearing when she had offered herself to the angels in paradise!

'Christine! Christine!' he called again… and he seemed to hear her cries through the thin floorboards which separated her from him! He bent down and listened, wandering this way and that across the stage like a mad thing! Yes, he must somehow go down, down, down into that pit of shadows to which every entrance was barred to him!

First, the traps which normally opened moved so smoothly to reveal the black abyss to which all his desires were now drawn… wooden boards which creaked under his feet and made the immense void beneath the stage reverberate… those flimsy traps were not only firmly closed tonight but seemed permanently fixed!… They gave an impression of solidity, of never having moved at all… and now no one was allowed access to the steps leading down beneath the stage!…

'Christine! Christine!'

He was turned away by people who laughed and scoffed, thinking that he, the poor fiancé, had lost his mind.

By what wild, headlong charge, through caverns of night and mystery known only to him, had Erik dragged Christine to his dismal lair and the Louis-Philippe drawing room whose door opened on to the Lake of Hell?

'Christine! Christine! Why don't you answer? At least tell me you're still alive! Or did you succumb in a moment of ultimate horror, overcome by the scorching breath of that monster!'

Terrible thoughts flashed like lightning through Raoul's over-heated brain.

It was clear that somehow Erik had discovered their plans and knew that Christine had betrayed him! Oh, what vengeance would be his!

To what lengths would the Angel of Music, humbled in his pride, not go? Christine had fallen into the terrible clutches of the monster and was doomed!

Raoul remembered the smouldering twin stars which had skulked on his balcony the night before. Why hadn't he put their light out for good with his gun?

Now, some people have extraordinary eyes which dilate in the dark and shine like stars or like the eyes of cats. (Certain albino men who look as if they have eyes like a rabbit's by day have cat's eyes at night, as every schoolboy knows!)

But he'd shot at Erik! So why had he not killed him? The monster had got away by the drainpipe, like a cat or a convict who—every schoolboy knows this too—could scramble over any roof as long as they had a drainpipe to climb up.

It was probable that Erik had been planning some decisive move against Raoul. But he'd been wounded and made good his escape intending to turn his attention to poor Christine instead.

Raoul's head was filled with this deadly thought as he hurried to her dressing room.

'Christine! Christine!'

Bitter tears stung his eyes when he saw, set out on tables and chairs, the clothes Christine had been planning to wear for their escape!… Oh, why had she refused to go earlier? Why had she insisted on waiting so long?… Why had she played with fire?… and paid such attention to the monster's feelings?… Why, with a supreme act of pity, had she made her ultimate bounty the gift of her final aria:

> 'Angels so pure, Angels bright!
> Angels so pure, Angels of light!
> Transport my soul to heaven above!'

Raoul, his throat choked by sobs, oaths and insults, ran his clumsy hands over the surface of the large mirror which he had seen open one night and allow Christine to pass into the sinister depths below. He pressed on it, he pushed and felt it… but it seemed that the mirror obeyed no one but Erik… Perhaps pushing and touching had no effect on such a mirror?… Perhaps all it took was to say certain words aloud?… When he was a boy he'd been told that there were objects which responded to the human voice!

Suddenly, Raoul remembered: 'an iron gate opening on to the Rue Scribe… an underground passage that rises straight from the Lake to street-level'!… Yes Christine had told him about it… He looked but the large key was unfortunately not in its box. Nevertheless he rushed out to the Rue Scribe.

Once there, he ran his trembling hands in the dark over the enormous stone blocks of which the walls were built, searching for exits and doors… he felt bars… were those the right bars?… or these others… or were they an air-vent?… He peered helplessly through the bars… it was black as pitch inside!… he listened!… utter silence!… He walked right round the great building!… He came across large, iron bars!… immensely strong gates!… Beyond them was the courtyard which houses the offices.

Raoul hurried across to the concierge's lodge.

'Excuse me, Madame, could you tell me where I'd find a door, or rather an iron gate, made of bars… iron bars… that opens into the Rue Scribe?… and goes down to the Lake!… You know the Lake I mean? Yes, *lake!* The underground lake… under the Opera!'

'Well, dear, I know there's a lake under the Opera, but I don't know any door as leads to it… I never been there meself!…'

'Well, what about the Rue Scribe? You know, the Rue Scribe? Have you ever been in the Rue Scribe?'

She laughed! Oh how she laughed! Raoul fled, cursing with frustration. He dashed up steps, ran down others, through offices and finally came out into the bright lights of the stage.

There he stopped, chest heaving, his heart beating and ready to burst. Maybe Christine Daaé had been found! He saw a group of men and asked:

'Excuse me, gentlemen, could you please tell me where I might find Christine Daaé?'

And they laughed too.

At that very moment, the stage began to buzz with excitement. In the middle of a noisy crowd of men in dress suits talking and waving their arms, appeared a man who in contrast was calmness itself. He had a kindly face. It was pink and chubby-cheeked, framed by curly hair and lit by a pair of splendidly imperturbable eyes. Mercier, the Administrator, pointed out the newcomer to the Viscount de Chagny and said:

'Here's the man you should ask. Let me introduce Inspector Mifroid, of the Paris Police.'

'Ah! M. de Chagny! I'm delighted to meet you, sir,' said the Inspector. 'If you'd be good enough to follow me, sir… And now, where would I find the Directors?… Where are they?'

Since the Administrator said nothing, Rémy, the secretary, took it upon himself to inform the Inspector that both Directors had locked themselves inside their office and still did not even know that an incident had occurred.

'That hardly seems possible!… Let's go to their office!'

Inspector Mifroid, pursued by a growing procession, made his way towards the offices of the Directors. Mercier took advantage of the confusion to slip a key into Gabriel's hand:

'This is not going at all well,' he muttered to him… 'Go, get Mme Giry off the premises.'

Dutifully, Gabriel slipped away.

Moments later, Inspector Mifroid halted outside the door of the Directors' office. Mercier beat on it but in vain: it remained closed.

'Open in the name of the law!' barked the clear but slightly concerned voice of Inspector Mifroid.

Eventually the door opened. The crowd all piled into the office hard on the Inspector's heels.

Raoul brought up the rear. But as he was about to follow the rest inside, he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard these words whispered in his ear:

'*Erik's secrets are nobody's business but his!*'

He turned and stifled a cry. The hand which had settled on his shoulder was now being held to the lips of an individual with ebony skin and green eyes. He was wearing an astrakhan fez… It was the Persian!

The man held his hand where it was, urging discretion. Then, before the astonished Viscount could ask him to explain his mysterious intervention, he bowed and was gone.

16
Mrs. Giry's amazing revelations of her personal dealings with the Phantom of the Opera

BEFORE following Inspector Mifroid into the Directors' office, perhaps the reader will allow me to mention certain highly unusual events which had just occurred in the said office, to which Rémy, the secretary, and Mercier, the Administrator, had both tried and failed to gain entry, and in which Messrs Richard and Moncharmin had locked themselves for reasons still unclear to the reader which it is my duty as chronicler to keep hidden from him no longer.

I have had occasion to observe that, over a period, the mood of both Directors had changed for the worse. I have also let it be understood that this change was not entirely attributable to the fall of the chandelier in circumstances which have been widely reported.

The reader should know—despite the Directors' earnest wish to bury the subject for ever—that first payment of the Phantom's monthly 20,000 francs had gone smoothly. But there had been such weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth! Still, the transaction had taken place without a hitch:

One morning, the Directors had found a ready-prepared envelope on their desk. It was addressed to *The P. of the O., Esquire*, and marked 'personal'. In it was a note from the Phantom himself:

> 'The moment has come to implement the clauses of the schedule of agreement. You will place twenty 1,000-franc notes in this envelope which you will then close with your own seal. You will then give it to Mme Giry who will do the rest.'

The Directors did not wait to be told twice. Without wasting time asking how such devilish communications could find their way to an office which they were always careful to keep locked, they decided that here was an excellent opportunity to collar the mysterious blackmailer. They told the whole story to Gabriel and Mercier after swearing them to secrecy. Then they put 20,000 francs into the envelope and gave it, without asking for explanations, to Mme Giry who had been reinstated. She showed no surprise. I hardly need say that her every move was closely watched! She went straight to the Phantom's box and put the envelope on the ledge by the front armrest. The two Directors, along with Gabriel and Mercier, stayed hidden, but in such a way that the envelope was never out of their sight for a single moment throughout the performance and even when it was over. The envelope had not moved and the watching men did not move either. The theatre emptied, Mme Giry went home and still both Directors, Gabriel and Mercier remained at their post. Finally they wearied of the game and, after making sure that the seal was intact, they opened the envelope.

At first, Richard and Moncharmin thought the notes were still inside. But on closer inspection, they saw that they were not the same. The twenty notes had gone and been replaced by twenty others issued by the 'Bank of Saint Farce'![*] Their fury was quickly followed by fear.

'He's more slippery than Robert Houdin!'[*] cried Gabriel.

'True,' said Richard, 'but he'd have come cheaper!'

Moncharmin wanted to send for Inspector Mifroid. Richard was against it. He seemed to have a plan.

'Don't let's make ourselves ridiculous,' he said. 'We'd be the laughing stock of all Paris! The Phantom has won the first round. But we'll win the next,' he added, obviously thinking of the second payment to come.

Even so, they'd been so completely outmanoeuvred that during the weeks that followed they were unable to throw off the feeling that they had bitten off more than they could chew. Which was all too understandable. If the Inspector hadn't been called in at that point, it was because it must not be forgotten that the Directors kept thinking privately that the whole bizarre episode was probably no more than some nasty practical joke played on them by their predecessors about which it was best to say nothing until they had found 'the key to the mystery'. But for Moncharmin, this policy was at times undermined by a suspicion he harboured about Richard who was himself an occasional hoaxer. And so, ready for every contingency, they waited on events, watching Mme Giry and having her watched. Richard insisted that she be kept in the dark.

'If she is an accomplice,' he said, 'those banknotes are long gone. But as far as I'm concerned, she's just a stupid woman.'

'There are lots of stupid people involved in this business,' replied Moncharmin pensively.

'Who'd have thought it?' groaned Richard. 'But fear not!… next time I'll be ready for him!'

The next time eventually came round… as it happened, on the very day of Christine Daaé's disappearance.

In the morning, a note from the Phantom reminded them that payment was due. It was very helpful:

> 'Proceed exactly as you did the last time. *It all went smoothly then*. Give the envelope containing the 20,000 francs to the excellent Mme Giry.'

The note was accompanied by the same self-directed envelope. It only needed to be filled.

The operation was due to be carried out the same evening, half an hour before the performance was due to begin. So it is approximately half an hour before the curtain rose on that all-too-famous performance of *Faust* that we set out to beard both Directors in their den.

Richard shows Moncharmin the envelope. Then he counts out the 20,000 francs and puts them in the envelope, but without sealing it.

'Now,' he said, 'call Mme Giry.'

The concierge was fetched. She entered and curtsied low. She still wore the same black taffeta dress (though the black was now turning to rust and lilac) and the familiar dingy hat with the feathers. She seemed in fine fettle and spoke out directly:

'Good evening, sir and sir, I s'pose it's about the envelope?'

'That's right, Mme Giry,' said Richard in his friendliest voice, 'it's about the envelope… and about another matter too.'

'Always glad to oblige, M. Richard sir, always ready… And what is this other matter, if I may be so bold?'

'First, Mme Giry, I have something to ask you, nothing important.'

'Ask away, sir. Mme Giry is ready to answer.'

'Are you still on good terms with the Phantom?'

'Couldn't be better, sir, never better.'

'Good, we're delighted, as you can see… So tell me, Mme Giry,' said Richard adopting a highly confidential manner. 'Just between ourselves… we can tell you… you're no fool…'

'Oh sir!' she cried as the two black feathers in her dingy hat suddenly ceased their friendly nodding, 'I'll have you know that nobody's ever had any doubts on that score!'

'Quite so. I see we're going to get along famously. Now, this business of the Phantom is somebody's idea of a joke, isn't it?… And still between ourselves… it's gone on too long.'

Mme Giry stared at the Directors as if they'd been talking Chinese. She went up to Richard's desk and, suddenly nervous, said:

'What are you on about?… I don't get you!'

'Oh, I think you follow us perfectly… In any case, you must understand… First, you're going to tell us his name.'

'Who you talking about?'

'The man, Mme Giry, whose accomplice you are!'

'Me? The 'complice of the Phantom?… The'complice in what?'

'You do exactly what he tells you.'

'Oh he don't ask very often.'

'But he always slips you a little something?'

'I got no complaints.'

'How much does he give you for taking him the envelope?'

'Ten francs.'

'Really? That's not much!'

'How do you mean?'

'I'll tell you why later, Mme Giry. But for the moment we'd like to know exactly why, for what extraordinary reason… you've given yourself body and soul to this Phantom rather than to another, er, being… Don't tell me anyone can have the loyalty and friendship of Mme Giry just by slipping her the odd five or ten francs?'

'That's true!… So I'll tell you the reason, sir! And I'm not ashamed of it… the very opposite.'

'We don't doubt it for a moment, Mme Giry.'

'But, to be honest… the Phantom don't like me talking about his business.'

'Oh really!' snorted Richard.

'Still I reckon this is no one's business but me own!' she went on. 'It all started in Box 5… One night I found a letter for me… or a note more like, written in red ink… I don't have to read it out to you, sir, I know it by heart… and I'll never forget it if I live to be a hundred!'

And Mme Giry recited the letter straight off with touching eloquence.

'Madame,

1825: Mlle Ménétrier, leader of the ballet, becomes Marquise de Cussy.

1832: Mlle Marie Taglioni, dancer, becomes Countess Gilbert des Voisins.

1846: La Sota, dancer, marries a brother of the King of Spain.

1847: Lola Montez, dancer, makes a morganatic marriage with Louis, King of Bavaria, and becomes Countess de Landsfeld.

1848: Mlle Maria, dancer, becomes Baroness d'Hermeville.

1870: Thérèse Hessler, dancer, marries Don Fernando, brother of the King of Portugal.'

Richard and Moncharmin listened to the old woman who, the further she went in her curious litany of glorious nuptials, grew more animated, drew herself up to her full height, became bolder and, finally, no less inspired than the Sibyl of old on her stool,* exclaimed in a voice bursting with pride the last entry of the prophetic note:

'1885: Meg Giry, empress!'*

Worn out by this supreme effort, she collapsed on to a chair saying:

'And the note, M. Richard sir, was signed: "*The Phantom of the Opera!*" I'd heard people talking about a ghost but I never only half believed it. The day he said that my little Meg, the child of my bosom and fruit of my womb, would be a Hempress, well, I believed it from top to bottom!'

There was no need to study the exalted look on Mme Giry's face for more than a moment to realize how easy it had been to obtain the full and eager cooperation of this superior intellect just by using the words 'Phantom' and 'Empress'.

But who was pulling the strings of this ridiculous puppet?… Who?…

'You've never seen him, he speaks to you and you believe everything he tells you?' asked Moncharmin.

'Oh yes! At the start it was on account of him that my little Meg got made up to be a leader of a row. I said to the Phantom, I told him: "Look, if she's going to be a Hempress in 1885, you'd best get a move on, she's got to be a row-leader as soon as ever!" And he says: "Righty ho!" So he had a quick word with M. Poligny and it was all fixed…'

'You're sure M. Poligny saw the Phantom?…'

'He never saw him no more than I ever have. But he heard him! The Phantom spoke to him—you know, that night he come out of Box 5 looking green at the gills.'

Moncharmin sighed:

'What a business!' he groaned.

'Now,' said Mme Giry, 'I always thought the Phantom and M. Poligny had secrets. Every time the Phantom asked M. Poligny for something, M. Poligny said yes… M. Poligny never said no to the Phantom.'

'Hear that, Richard? Poligny never said no to the Phantom!'

'Yes, yes, I heard!' said Richard. 'So M. Poligny is a friend of the Phantom! And since Mme Giry is a friend of M. Poligny… there we have the answer!' he barked in triumph. 'But I'm not bothered about M. Poligny… the only person whose fate really interests me, and I make no bones about it, is Mme Giry!… Mme Giry, have you any idea what's in this envelope?'

'I should think not!' she said.

'Have a look!'

Mme Giry shot a worried look into the envelope. Then her face lit up.

'Thousand-franc notes!' she cried.

'That's right, Mme Giry!… Thousand-franc banknotes!… But you knew that already!'

'Me, M. Richard?… I swear I never…'

'Don't swear, Mme Giry!… And now I shall tell you the other matter I mentioned when I asked you here… I'm going to have you arrested.'

The two black feathers on her shabby hat, which usually looked like question marks, immediately changed into exclamation marks, while the hat itself wobbled wildly, threatening the frayed chignon beneath. Little Meg's mother also registered surprise, indignation, protest and trepidation by means of an alarming pirouette of injured innocence, something between a hop and a glide, which brought her in one movement face to face with M. Richard who instinctively recoiled in his chair.

'*Have me arrested!*'

The mouth from which these words issued seemed as if they were also about to spit its three remaining teeth at him. M. Richard behaved heroically. He stopped retreating and, with one forefinger, ominously pointed accusingly at the attendant of Box 5 for the benefit of her absent judges.

'I intend to have you arrested, Mme Giry, for theft!'

'Say that again!!'

And before M. Moncharmin could intervene, Mme Giry caught the Director a hefty swipe. There! The charge was refuted with a vengeance! But what had caught the Director's cheek was not the leathery hand of the furious old termagant but the cause of all the trouble, the envelope, the magic envelope. Under the force of the impact it split and released the banknotes which flew up into the air, twirling and whirling like giant butterflies.

Both Directors let out a cry of anguish and the same impulse brought them to their knees, feverishly gathering up and hastily checking all the precious pieces of paper.

'*Are they still genuine?*' asked Moncharmin.

'*Are they still genuine?*' asked Richard.

'Yes, they're still genuine!!!'

Above them, Mme Giry's three teeth clashed in a strident thunder of outraged discontent. Its general tenor was, however, perfectly clear:

'Me, a thief! A thief, me?'

She struggled for breath.

'Defiled!' she cried, 'I feel defiled!'

And then she brought her nose to within inches of Richard's.

'And another thing, M. Richard, *you should know better than me what happened to them twenty thousand francs!*'

'Me?' said Richard, looking stunned. 'And how should I know?'

But Moncharmin, suddenly grave and looking worried, wanted her to explain.

'What do you mean, Mme Giry?' he asked. 'Why do you say that M. Richard *knows better than you do* about what happened to the twenty thousand francs?'

Meanwhile Richard, feeling his face turn red under Moncharmin's close scrutiny, seized Mme Giry's wrist and yanked on it very hard. His was now the voice of thunder… It bellowed… It deafened…

'Why do I know better than you about what happened to the twenty thousand francs? Tell me!'

'Because they ended up in your pocket!…' gulped the old woman, staring at him as if he was the Devil in person.

It was now M. Richard's turn to be blasted by this bolt from the blue and then withered by M. Moncharmin's increasingly suspicious eye. And then the strength he needed at this testing moment to reject such a despicable accusation suddenly drained away.

He reacted instinctively the way innocent persons with a clear conscience react when a finger is pointed at them. They blanch or blush, stand up or bow down, protest or say nothing when they should say something, or say something when it would be better to say nothing, or stay unruffled when they should mop their brow, or perspire when the thing to do is to stay cool, such persons, I was saying, look guilty.*

Moncharmin swiftly forestalled the avenging impulse which was urging the innocent Richard to launch himself physically at Mme Giry by taking over the questioning, using his best, gently coaxing manner.

'Why do you suspect my colleague, M. Richard, of putting the twenty thousand francs into his own pocket?'

'I never said no such thing!' said Mme Giry, 'seeing as how it was me in person that put the money in M. Richard's pocket!'

Then she muttered: 'Well it's out now! Can't be helped… May the Phantom forgive me!'

And when Richard started bellowing again, Moncharmin told him to be quiet in no uncertain terms:

'Please! Allow me! You must let the woman explain! If you don't mind, I'll ask the questions!'

And he added:

'It's very odd of you to act like this!… Here we are, nearing the point when this whole mystery is about to be cleared up and you lose your temper. You're quite wrong! For my part, I think the whole thing is rather amusing!'

Poor, martyred Mme Giry looked up, her eyes shining with her faith in her own innocence.

'You said there was twenty thousand francs in the envelope I put in M. Richard's pocket. But like I said, I didn't know nothing about that… nor M. Richard neither!'

'Aha!' said Richard, with a triumphant flourish which Moncharmin did not care for. 'I didn't know anything about it either! You put twenty thousand francs in my pocket, unbeknownst to me! I'm very glad to hear it, Mme Giry.'

'Oh yes!' said the formidable lady, 'it's all true!… Neither of us was in the know!… But you, sir, you must have noticed the money there sooner or later?'

Richard would have skinned Mme Giry alive if Moncharmin hadn't been there. But Moncharmin swiftly went to her defence by speeding up the questioning:

'What kind of envelope did you put in M. Richard's pocket? It obviously wasn't the one we gave you, the one we saw you take to Box 5, the one that contained the twenty thousand francs.'

'Beg pardon! The one I put in M. Richard's pocket was the one he gave me,' explained Mme Giry. 'The one I took to the Phantom's box was another one altogether that looked exactly the same. The Phantom gave it me beforehand. I had it ready up my sleeve!'

And so saying Mme Giry produced from her sleeve an addressed envelope identical to the one now containing the 20,000 francs. The Directors took it, inspected it, and noted that it was closed with their own duly affixed seal. They opened it… Inside were twenty Bank of Saint Farce notes which were also identical with those which had so amazed them the previous month.

'But it's so simple!' said Richard.

'So simple!' repeated Moncharmin, even more solemnly than usual.

'The best tricks are always the simplest,' said Richard. 'All it takes is an accomplice…'

'… who could be male or *female*,' Moncharmin added casually, but he continued to stare fixedly at Mme Giry as if he was trying to hypnotize her:

'You're quite sure it was the Phantom who gave you this envelope and told you to switch it for the one we handed to you to deliver? Was it the Phantom who told you to slip it into M. Richard's pocket?'

'It was him all right!'

'Then would you mind giving us a small demonstration of your pickpocketing talents?… Here's the envelope. Carry on as if we have no idea what's going on.'

'As you like, M. Moncharmin, sir.'

Mme Giry picked up the envelope containing the twenty banknotes, headed for the door and was about to leave their office when both Directors descended on her.

'Not so fast! We've been *had* once and once is enough. We have no intention of being *had* again!'

'Beg pardon, gentlemen,' said the old woman apologetically, 'but you said you wanted me to carry on as if you weren't in the know… Well, if you don't know what's going on, I oughter walk off now with your envelope!'

'But how are you going to slip it into my pocket?' said Richard keeping up the pressure, while Moncharmin kept his left eye on him and the right on Mme Giry, an ocularly challenging tactic, but he was determined to leave no stone unturned in his pursuit of the truth.

'I'm s'posed to slip it in your pocket just when you're least expecting it, sir. I always come in some time during the evening, you know, for a bit of a look round backstage. I often take my daughter over to the foyer of the corps de ballet, like I'm entitled to being her mother. I carry her dancing pumps for when she goes on stage for her part in the performance, and sometimes I take her little sprinkler too… Anyway, I come and go as I please… Gentlemen with season tickets also

come and go, sir… there's always ever so many people milling around… So I step behind you and slip the envelope into the pocket of your coat-tails and there you are!… It's not magic!'

'Not magic, eh?' said Richard with a snort and rolling his eyes like Jove about to hurl a thunderbolt, 'of course it wasn't magic! But you're lying, you old witch, and I can prove it!'

The insult stung the worthy lady much less than the doubt cast on her truthfulness. She drew herself up again, bristled, and bared those three front teeth.

'What proof's that, then?'

'Proof that I spent all that evening in the auditorium, watching Box 5 and the bogus envelope that you put there. I never went down to the foyer for one second…'

'But, sir, that wasn't the night I slipped you the envelope!… It was the next night!… the night the Under-Secketary of State for Art and Culture…'

Here M. Richard suddenly stopped Mme Giry in mid-flow.

'It's true,' he said thoughtfully. 'I remember now… The Under Secretary went backstage. He asked for me. I went down and waited by the staircase in the foyer for a moment or two… He and his PPS were there in the body of the hall… I turned round suddenly… It was you passing just behind me, Mme Giry, I thought you'd brushed against me… I can see you now!'

'I should think so too, M. Richard! That's exackly how it happened! I'd just finished doing the necessary with your pocket! It's a very easy pocket to deal with you got there, sir!'

And once again, Mme Giry matched word with deed. She went behind M. Richard and—so quickly that Moncharmin, who had been watching closely, was impressed by her deftness—slipped the envelope into the pocket of one of the tails of his partner's fish and soup.

'Couldn't be handier!' snorted Richard who had turned pale. 'This Phantom is a most ingenious fellow. The problem for him was: how to eliminate any dangerous connection between whoever handed over the twenty thousand and the person who received it! And what he came up with was to remove the cash from my pocket without my noticing because I didn't even know it was there in the first place!… By God, it's clever!'

'Clever, certainly,' said Moncharmin, no less admiringly… 'Only you're forgetting one thing, Richard: I supplied ten of the twenty thousand and no one put anything in my pocket!'

17
More about the Strange Request for a Safety Pin

THOSE last words uttered by Moncharmin expressed the misgivings he felt about his partner only too clearly for there not to be a stormy scene between them. The upshot was that Richard agreed to accept whatever Moncharmin would decide in their search for the villain who was leading them by the nose.

And so we return to the interval at the end of the garden scene of *Faust* when M. Rémy, the secretary, a man who never missed a thing, observed the peculiar behaviour of both Directors. We shall now have no difficulty explaining their unfathomably baroque conduct which would otherwise be impossible to reconcile with the dignity of their office.

Richard and Moncharmin behaved in a manner dictated by what Mme Giry had revealed to them. 1st: Richard would reproduce exactly every one of his movements of the evening the first 20,000 francs had disappeared; 2nd: Moncharmin would not take his eyes off Richard's back pocket into which Mme Giry had slipped the second 20,000.

M. Richard returned to the exact spot where he'd been standing when he had greeted the Under-Secretary. M. Moncharmin took up a position a few steps to his rear.

Mme Giry arrives, brushes against M. Richard, divests herself of the 20,000 by slipping the envelope into his back pocket, then disappears.

Or rather she was removed.

Carrying out orders given him a few moments earlier, before this scene was re-enacted, Mercier now took her away and locked her up in his office. It was thus impossible for her to communicate with her Phantom. She put up no resistance, for Mme Giry now cut a sorry, shabby figure, flustered, frightened, eyes staring like a startled chicken under its ragged comb, already hearing the echoing corridor outside ring with the heavy tread of the Inspector with whom she had been threatened, and heaving sighs deep enough to shatter the columns supporting the Opera's grand staircase.

Meanwhile, M. Richard leaned forward, bowed, greeted his guest and withdrew backwards as if the Under-Secretary for Art and Culture, a high and almighty public servant, had really been there in person.

The difference was that such courtesies would have elicited no surprise if the aforesaid Under-Secretary had been physically present and the Director had been receiving him. But now, since there was no one to respond to the Director's civilities, observers of a scene which was as natural as it was inexplicable were left understandably baffled.

M. Richard gave a welcome to empty space… bowed to nobody… and withdrew, backwards, in honour of a vacuum.

And then, a few steps away, M. Moncharmin did exactly the same, but also pushing M. Rémy away and begging Ambassador La Borderie and the head of Crédit Central 'not to touch the Director'.

Moncharmin, who still harboured his suspicions, had no intention of letting Richard come to him later when the 20,000 francs had vanished and say: 'Maybe it was the Ambassador… or the head of Crédit central … or even M. Rémy…' All the more so since, by his own account of the first time his pocket was picked, Richard had had no further contact with anyone else in that part of the theatre after Mme Giry had brushed past him… So I ask you: if the idea was to reproduce exactly the same movements, where was the logic in letting anyone near him now?

Having begun walking ceremonially backwards, Richard continued in the same careful manner all the way to the corridor where the Directors had their office… In this way, he was constantly watched from behind by Moncharmin while he was able to see anyone approaching from the front.

But again, this novel style of perambulation adopted by the Directors of the National Academy of Music obviously could not pass unremarked.

And remarked it had been.

But while this picturesque scene was unfolding, it was fortunate for Messrs Richard and Moncharmin that the girls of the ballet school were nearly all in their dressing rooms under the eaves, for the Directors would have been a great success with them.

But all they could think about was their 20,000 francs.

When they got to the dimly lit corridor leading to their office, Richard whispered to Moncharmin:

'I'm positive no one's touched me… now, you stand back from me in the shadow and watch me until I get to the door… We mustn't do anything to put anyone on their guard… Then we'll see what's what.'

But Moncharmin said: 'No, Richard! You walk on ahead… and I'll be just behind you! I'll cling to you like a limpet!'

'But that way,' objected Richard, 'no one will ever steal our twenty thousand francs!'

'I sincerely hope they don't!' said Moncharmin.

'In that case, what we're doing is pointless!'

'We are doing exactly what we did last time… Then, I caught up with you as you walked off the stage and started walking along the corridor… and I followed you *from behind!*'

'You're quite right!' sighed Richard with a shake of the head, passively deferring to Moncharmin.

Two minutes later both Directors were locked in their office. Moncharmin pocketed the key.

'That night, we both stayed locked in like this,' he said, 'and remained here until you left the building to go home.'

'That's right! And we weren't disturbed by anyone.'

'No one.'

'In that case,' said Richard, making a great effort to gather his memories, 'I was obviously robbed as I made my way from the Opera to my house.'

'No!' said Moncharmin even more sharply than before. 'No!… that's not possible, because I dropped you off in my cab. So the twenty thousand must have vanished after you got home, in your house!… I can't see that there's any doubt about it!'

This is what had been in Moncharmin's mind all along.

'Poppycock!' cried Richard… 'I trust all the servants!… Besides, if one of them did it, he'd have made himself scarce by now!…'

Moncharmin shrugged as if to say he had no intention of arguing about it.

This gave Richard the idea that Moncharmin was adopting a very high-handed attitude towards him.

'I've had enough of this, Moncharmin!'

'And I, Richard, have had more than enough!'

'You have the nerve to suspect me?'

'Yes, of playing a tasteless joke!'

'Nobody jokes about twenty thousand francs!'

'Exactly my view!' declared Moncharmin, opening a newspaper which he proceeded to read with studied care.

'What are you doing?' asked Richard. 'Surely you're not going to read the paper now?'

'Yes, Richard, I am, until it's time to take you home.'

'Like last time?'

'Exactly like last time.'

Richard tore the paper from Moncharmin's hands. Moncharmin got to his feet, angrier than ever. Before him stood Richard who, also more furious than ever, folded his arms over his chest in a gesture which has been a provocation since the beginning of time and said:

'Listen, I'll tell you what I'm thinking. *I'm thinking about what I might think* if, like last time, I were to spend the evening here alone with you and you took me home, and if, as we said goodnight, I discovered that the twenty thousand had disappeared from my coat pocket… like last time.'

'And what might you think?' said Moncharmin, turning red in the face with anger.

'I might think that since you'd never left me alone for a single moment, and that by your own wish you were the only one to come anywhere near me, like last time, I might very well think that if the twenty banknotes were no longer in my pocket, there was a good chance they were in yours!…'

Hearing the charge, Moncharmin leaped to his feet.

'Wait!' he cried. 'A safety pin!'

'What do you want with a safety pin?'

'To pin you with it!… If only I had a safety pin!'

'You want to stick a safety pin in me?'

'No, I want to pin you to the twenty thousand francs! That way, whether it happens here or on the way to your house or inside your house, you'll feel it if any hand tries to pick your pocket… that way, Richard, you'll know if it's mine!… So now you suspect me!… A safety pin!'

That was the moment when Moncharmin opened the door and bellowed down the corridor:

'A safety pin! Someone get me a safety pin!'

But we also know how at the same instant, Rémy, the secretary, who did not have a safety pin about his person, was shouted at by M. Moncharmin while an office boy came running up with the much-coveted object.

And this is what happened next: Moncharmin shut and locked the door then got down on both knees to inspect the tails of Richard's coat.

'I trust', he said, 'that the twenty thousand francs are still there?'

'Me too,' said Richard.

'The genuine ones?' asked Moncharmin who was determined that he was not going to be 'had' a second time.

'You look! I don't want to touch them,' said Richard.

Moncharmin pulled the envelope from Richard's pocket and took out the banknotes. His hand trembled because this time, so that they could keep checking that the notes were all there, they hadn't sealed the envelope or even stuck the flap down. He was relieved to find they were all present, correct and genuine. He put them back in the tail-pocket and pinned them to it securely.

Then he sat down behind Richard and kept his eyes firmly fixed on his coat-tails while Richard never stirred from behind his desk.

'A little patience, Richard' said Moncharmin. 'It won't be long now… The clock will start chiming midnight very soon. Last time, we left the building on the final stroke of twelve.'

'I've got all the patience in the world!'

Time passed slowly, heavily, mysteriously, oppressively. Richard tried to laugh it off.

'I do believe that I might come round yet to believing that the Phantom is omnipotent,' he said. 'For instance, don't you sense something uneasy, unsettling, frightening in the air in this room?'

'You're right,' admitted Moncharmin who was genuinely on edge.

'The Phantom!' continued Richard in a whisper, as if he feared being overheard by invisible ears… 'What about this Phantom! Because if after all it was a ghost who gave those three loud knocks we heard distinctly… if it was a ghost who left magic envelopes for us… who was heard talking in Box 5… killed Joseph Buquet… unhooked the chandelier… and steals our money, just think a minute… There's only the two of us here!… So if the money vanishes and neither of us has anything to do with it… we'll have no option but to believe in a ghost, in the Phantom of the Opera!'

Just then, the clock on the mantelshelf began to whirr and the first stroke of midnight sounded.

Both Directors jumped. They were gripped by a sudden fear which they could not account for and fought vainly to control. They broke into a cold sweat. And the final stroke of twelve rang hollowly in their ears.

When the sound of the chimes had died away, they both heaved a relieved sigh and got to their feet.

'I think we can go now,' said Moncharmin.

'I think so too,' acquiesced Richard.

'Before we leave, do you mind if I look in your pocket?'

'But of course, Moncharmin. You must!'

While Moncharmin felt his pocket, Richard said: 'Well?'

'I can still feel the pin.'

'It goes without saying, as you so rightly said, that nobody can rob us without my noticing.'

But Moncharmin, still busy feeling Richard's coat-tails with his hands, suddenly cried out:

'I can feel the pin, but I can't feel the notes!'

'Stop it, Moncharmin! Please, no jokes!… This isn't the time for it!'

'Well, see for yourself!'

With one quick movement, Richard removed his coat. Both Directors rummaged for the pocket!… But *the pocket was empty!*

But most puzzling of all, the safety pin was still in the place where it had been put.

Richard and Moncharmin both turned pale. There was no way of avoiding the conclusion that here was witchcraft!

'The Phantom!' murmured Moncharmin.

But Richard suddenly turned to his colleague and snarled:

'You're the only one who's touched my pocket!… Give me back my twenty thousand francs!… I want my money back!…'

'On my life,' groaned Moncharmin who looked as if he was about to collapse… 'I swear I haven't got it!'

Then there was a knock on the door. He went to open it, his movements almost mechanical, and hardly seemed to recognize Mercier, the Administrator, with whom he exchanged a few desultory words but without understanding what was being said to him. Then, scarcely knowing what he was doing, into the hand of his loyal but totally bewildered subordinate he thrust the safety pin which was now of no further use to him.

18
The Police Inspector, the Viscount and the Persian

THE first thing Inspector Mifroid said as he entered the Directors' office was to ask if there was any news of the missing diva.

'Is Christine Daaé here?'

As I told you, a tight-knit group of men followed him in.

'Christine Daaé? Here? No. Why?'

Moncharmin, meanwhile, was too weak to string two words together. He was considerably more subdued than Richard, for Richard was still capable of suspecting Moncharmin whereas Moncharmin had been left staring at a great enigma, the great riddle which has perplexed mankind since its birth: the mystery of the Unknown.

Since the crowd around the two Directors and Inspector Mifroid were observing an impressive silence, Richard went on:

'Why are you asking me, Inspector, if Christine Daaé is here?'

'Because you are the Directors of the National Academy of Music,' the Inspector said soberly. 'She must be found.'

'What do you mean, she must be found? Has she disappeared?'

'Yes, in the middle of the performance!'

'In the middle of the performance? But that's astonishing!'

'Quite so! And what is no less astonishing than her disappearance is the fact that I should have to break the news to you!'

'You're right,' agreed Richard, taking his head in both hands and muttering: 'Not another disaster! Oh! It's enough to make a man want to hand in his resignation!…'

And he plucked hairs from his moustache without realizing what he was doing.

'So,' he went on, as if in a waking dream, 'she disappeared in the middle of the performance?'

'Yes, she vanished in the prison act just as she was invoking the help of the angels, though I don't think it was an angel who took her.'

'And I'm sure it was!'

Everyone turned. A young man, pale-faced and shaking with emotion, repeated:

'I'm sure of it!'

'Sure of what?'

'That Christine Daaé was taken by an angel, Inspector. I can even tell you his name!'

'Ah, good evening, Viscount. So you claim Christine Daaé was abducted by an angel. Would that be an Opera angel?'

Raoul looked around him, obviously looking for someone. At that instant, when it seemed so vital that the police should be mobilized to help his fiancée, he would have been glad of a glimpse of the enigmatic man who had warned him to be careful. But he was nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, he had to say something… But he couldn't answer questions in front of a crowd of men staring at him with tactless curiosity.

'Yes, Inspector, by an angel from the Opera,' he said. 'If we could have a word in private, I will tell you where you can find him.'

'Very well, sir,' said Mifroid who, inviting Raoul to take a chair next to him, waved everyone else away, except the Directors who would not have objected to being dismissed, so out of their depth did they feel.

Raoul took the plunge:

'Listen, Inspector. The angel's name is Erik. He lives here in the Opera House. He is the Angel of Music!'

'*The Angel of Music!* Really? Is that so?…

The Angel of Music!'

The Inspector turned to the Directors and asked:

'Do you know of any such angel on the premises?'

Both men shook their heads. They did not smile.

'Oh,' said Raoul, 'these gentlemen have heard a great deal about the Phantom of the Opera. Well, I can confirm that the Phantom of the Opera and the Angel of Music are one and the same. His real name is Erik.'

Mifroid stood up and stared intently at Raoul.

'I'm sorry to ask this, sir, but are you trying to make a fool of the law?'

'No!' protested Raoul with a sinking heart. 'Here's someone else', he thought, 'who isn't going to believe me!'

'Then what's all this nonsense about a Phantom of the Opera?'

'I've told you: these gentlemen are well acquainted with the stories.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said Mifroid turning to the Directors, 'it seems you know this Phantom of the Opera?'

Richard tugged at the few remaining hairs of his moustache.

'No, Inspector, we don't know him but we would very much like to! Why, only this evening he stole twenty thousand francs from us!'

And he turned and gave Moncharmin a threatening look which seemed to say: 'Give me back my twenty thousand francs or I'll tell him the whole story!' Moncharmin understood him only too well and, with a gesture of defeat, said:

'Go ahead! Tell him everything!'

Mifroid looked from Raoul to the Directors and back again. He was wondering if he'd strayed into a madhouse. He ran his hand through his hair.

'A ghost', he said, 'who, in the same evening, snatches an opera singer and steals twenty thousand francs, is a very busy ghost! Now, if you don't mind, we'll take them one at a time. The singer first and then the money. Now, M. de Chagny, would you try to take this seriously? Do you really believe Mlle Christine Daaé was abducted by an individual named Erik? Do you know this man? Have you seen him?'

'Yes, Inspector.'

'Where?'

'In a graveyard.'

Mifroid gave a start, looked hard at Raoul for a moment, then said:

'But of course!… Where else do you get ghosts? What were you doing in this graveyard?'

'Inspector,' began Raoul, 'I am quite aware how strange my answers must seem and of the effect they're probably having on you. But you must believe that I have not gone mad. What's at stake here is the safety of a person who is closer to me than even my dear brother Philippe. I wish I could convince you in a few words, for time is passing and every minute is precious. But unfortunately, unless I tell you the whole incredible story from the beginning, you'll never believe me. I shall tell you all I know about the Phantom of the Opera, Inspector. Not that I know that much…'

‘Fire away! Fire away!’ said Richard and Moncharmin, their curiosity suddenly roused. But unfortunately, despite a passing hope that they might learn something which would put them on the track of the extortionist, they were soon forced to accept the sad fact that M. Raoul de Chagny was off his head. His ramblings about Perros-Guirec, death-heads and an enchanted fiddler could only be the product of the deluded brain of a young man in love.

Moreover, it became quite clear Mifroid was increasingly inclined to share their view of Raoul and he would certainly have cut short his wild ramblings (of matters outlined earlier in our narrative) if circumstances had not taken a hand.

The door opened and in stepped a man strangely dressed in an immense black greatcoat and a shiny yet scuffed top hat which was held up by his ears. He hurried to the Inspector and spoke to him in a whisper. He was doubtless some plain clothes man reporting.

While they conferred, Mifroid did not take his eyes off Raoul. Finally, he spoke:

‘M. de Chagny, that’s quite enough about your Phantom. Now, if you have no objection, I’d like to talk about you. Were you planning to run away with Mlle Christine Daaé tonight?’

‘Yes, Inspector.’

‘When the performance was over?’

‘Yes, Inspector.’

‘And the arrangements were all made?’

‘Yes, Inspector.’

‘The carriage you came in was also to whisk the both of you away, the driver had his instructions, and his route had been given to him in advance. Not just that, but there would be fresh horses waiting at every staging post?…’

‘All true, Inspector.’

‘Yet your carriage is still there, waiting your orders, outside the Rotonde?’

‘Yes, Inspector.’

‘Were you aware that there were three other carriages next to yours?’

‘I really didn’t notice.’

‘One was Mlle Sorelli’s, which hadn’t found room in the courtyard, the others belonged to Mlle Carlotta and your brother, Count de Chagny.’

‘Possibly.’

‘But it is quite certain that… put it this way, your carriage, La Sorelli’s and La Carlotta’s are still where they were, at the kerbside outside the Rotonde… but the Count’s has gone…’

‘I don’t see what that’s got to do with anything, Inspector.’

‘Excuse me! Wasn’t the Count opposed to your marriage with Mlle Daaé?’

‘That is a matter for the family.’

‘That answers my question… You said that he was against it… and that’s why you were planning to elope with Christine Daaé, to put some distance between the two of you and what the Count might do… Well, sir, let me inform you that your brother has moved faster than you!… He’s the one who abducted Christine Daaé!’

‘Ah!’ cried Raoul, hand on heart, ‘that can’t be!… Are you sure?’

‘Immediately after his abduction of the singer in which he was aided and abetted by persons and means we have yet to identify, he jumped into his carriage and drove off furiously through Paris.’

‘Through Paris?’ asked Raoul. ‘What do you mean, “through” Paris?’

‘Across and out of Paris.’

‘Out of Paris… which road did he take?’

‘The road to Brussels.’

A groan of dismay escaped from the Viscount’s lips.

‘I’ll go after them!’ he cried. ‘I’ll catch them, I swear!’

And with one bound, he was out of the door.

‘And bring her back to us!’ the Inspector called after him gleefully. ‘How about that for a lead! Much better than your guff about the Angel of Music!’

Turning to his stunned audience, he gave them a short course in grown-up police methods.

‘Actually, I have no idea if it was really the Count de Chagny who abducted Christine Daaé… But I need to know, and at this moment I can think of no one better than the Viscount to tell me… As we speak, he’s going at it hell for leather!… He’s my main informant!… Now that, gentlemen, is the secret of successful policing. People make out it’s very complicated. In fact, it’s all very simple once you’ve realized that it’s all about getting the work of the police done by people who are not members of the force!’

Still, perhaps Inspector Mifroid would not have been quite so pleased with himself if he’d known that his fleet-footed errand boy had been halted in his tracks in the first corridor he came to. It was empty, the inquisitive crowd now having dispersed, and appeared deserted.

But Raoul found his path suddenly blocked by a tall, shadowy figure.

‘Where are you rushing off to like that, M. de Chagny?’ it said.

Raoul, resenting the delay, looked up and recognized the astrakhan fez he’d seen earlier. He stopped.

‘You again!’ he cried impatiently. ‘You know all Erik’s secrets but you never want me to talk about them. Who are you exactly?’

‘I think you know who I am,’ said the shadow. ‘I am the Persian!’

19
The Viscount and the Persian

RAOUL recalled that one evening, during a performance, his brother had pointed out an inscrutable individual about whom nothing was known, except that once somebody had said he was Persian and that he lived in a small apartment in the Rue de Rivoli.

The man with the ebony skin, jade-green eyes and an astrakhan fez craned confidentially over Raoul.

'I hope, M. de Chagny, that you haven't given Erik's secret away?'

'Why would I hesitate for one moment to betray a monster like him?' replied Raoul curtly as if trying to shake off a nuisance. 'Is he a friend of yours?'

'I sincerely hope you didn't say anything about Erik, sir, because his secret is also Christine Daaé's! When you talk about one you also talk about the other!'

'Look here,' said Raoul, growing increasingly impatient, 'you seem to know a lot about matters which concern me. Unfortunately, I haven't got time to hear you out.'

'I ask you again, M. de Chagny: where are you going in such a hurry?'

'Can't you guess? To rescue Christine Daaé!'

'In that case, stay, for Christine Daaé is here!'

'With Erik?'

'Yes, with Erik!'

'How do you know?'

'I was in the audience tonight. Only Erik could plan and carry out such an abduction! Ah!' he said with a deep sigh, 'I recognized the monster's handiwork!'

'So you know him?'

The Persian did not answer but Raoul heard him sigh again.

'Monsieur,' said Raoul, 'I don't know what you want… but can you do anything to help me?… I mean, to help Christine Daaé?'

'I think so, M. de Chagny. That's why I have waylaid you.'

'What can you do?'

'I can try to take you to her… and to him!'

'That's something I've already tried myself this evening and got nowhere… But if you could do such a thing for me, I would be eternally in your debt!… But there's one thing I should mention. Inspector Mifroid told me that Christine Daaé was kidnapped by my brother Philippe…'

'I don't believe that for one minute, M. de Chagny.'

'You don't think it's possible?'

'I couldn't say if it's possible or not. But there's the manner of the abduction. As far as I'm aware, Count Philippe de Chagny is *not a man who has ever dabbled in theatrical effects*.'

'What you say is very shrewd, sir. I've been a fool!… But let's not waste any more time! We must hurry! I place myself entirely in your hands… Why would I not believe you when no one else is prepared to believe me, when you are the only one who doesn't laugh when the name of Erik is mentioned?'

As he spoke, Raoul, with a spontaneous movement of his fever-hot hands, grasped the Persian's wrists. They were like ice.

'Be quiet!' ordered the Persian, stopping suddenly. With one ear he listened to the faint sounds coming from the theatre and, with the other, for any creaks or grating sounds in the walls and corridors above and around them. 'And never say that name aloud again! We'll say: *he* or *him!* That way there'll be less risk of attracting his attention.'

'Do you think he isn't too far away?'

'We can't rule anything out, sir, unless at this moment he's in *his retreat by the lake* with his victim!'

'So you know about his lair too!'

'If he's not there, he could be inside this wall, under our feet, or over our heads in the ceiling!… There's no telling!… An eye at a keyhole!… An ear behind a beam!…'

Cautioning him to muffle the sound of his footsteps, the Persian led Raoul along passages he'd never seen before, even during those weeks when Christine was showing him around this labyrinth.

'Pray God,' said the Persian to himself, 'pray God Darius has come!'

'Who's Darius?' asked Raoul as he ran to keep up.

'Darius is my servant.'

They were now in the middle of what looked like a regular Paris square. It was a large area dimly lit by one feeble lamp and was deserted. The Persian brought Raoul to a halt and in a low whisper, so low that he could hardly be heard, asked:

'What did you tell the Inspector?'

'I told him that the man who kidnapped Christine was the Angel of Music, also known as the Phantom of the Opera, and that his real name was…'

'Sh!… And did he believe you?

'No.'

'And how much importance did he attach to what you were saying?'

'None whatsoever.'

'He thought you were mad?'

'Yes.'

'That's good!'

Then they set off again at a run.

They went up and down several flights of stairs unfamiliar to Raoul. Then they came to a door which the Persian unlocked with a small pass key which he took from his waistcoat pocket. Like Raoul, the Persian was, of course, in evening dress. But whereas Raoul had a top hat, the Persian was wearing, as I have already said, a kind of fez made of astrakhan. It was a departure from the strict dress code observed backstage where a topper is de rigueur. But in France, extreme latitude is allowed to foreigners: an Englishman may keep his travelling hat and a Persian his astrakhan fez.

'You'll find, sir, that your top hat will be a nuisance on the next part of our mission… It would be best if you leave it in the dressing room.'

'What dressing room?' asked Raoul.

'Why, Mademoiselle Daaé's.'

Ushering Raoul through the door he had just opened, the Persian gestured to her dressing room which was exactly opposite.

Raoul had not known it was possible to get to Christine's dressing room by any other route than the one he normally took. He now found himself at the far end of the long corridor he usually walked along from end to end before knocking on her door.

‘Oh!’ said Raoul. ‘I see that you know your way round the Opera!’

‘Not as well as *he* does!’ the Persian said modestly.

And he pushed Raoul into Christine’s dressing room.

It was as Raoul had left it only a short time before.

The Persian closed the door behind them and made for the flimsy partition wall separating the dressing room from a large lumber room which was its continuation. He listened and then coughed loudly.

Immediately there came the sound of someone moving in the lumber room and moments later there was a knock at the door.

‘Come in!’ said the Persian.

A man entered. He too wore an astrakhan fez and a long overcoat. He bowed and from under his coat produced a richly carved case which he put on the dressing table, bowed again and was about to leave.

‘Did anyone see you come in, Darius?’

‘No, master.’

‘Make sure no one sees you as you go.’

The servant glanced warily up and down the corridor and was suddenly gone.

‘Listen,’ said Raoul, ‘I’ve just thought of something. We could easily be found here and that would not be helpful. It won’t be long before Inspector Mifroid comes and searches Christine’s dressing room.’

‘It’s not the Inspector we have to be afraid of!’

The Persian opened the case. Inside was a pair of long pistols. The design and decoration were superb.

‘The moment Christine Daaé was abducted, Viscount, I told my servant he was to be ready to bring me these pistols. I have had them a long time. There are none more reliable and accurate.’

‘You intend to fight a duel?’ asked Raoul, rather taken aback by the sudden appearance of this weaponry.

‘We are indeed heading for a duel, sir,’ replied the Persian as he inspected the priming in the pistols. ‘And what a duel it will be!’

And so saying, he handed one pistol to Raoul and went on:

‘In the line up, there will be two of us against one of *him*. But be prepared for anything!… I won’t disguise the fact that we are going up against as formidable an opponent as can be imagined. But you love Christine Daaé, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do! But what about you, sir? You do not love her, so will you explain why it’s quite clear that you are prepared to risk your life for her?… You must really hate Erik!’

‘No, Viscount,’ the Persian said sadly, ‘I don’t hate him. If I did, he would have stopped being able to hurt people a long time ago.’

‘Did he hurt you?’

‘I have forgiven him for what he did to me.’

‘It really is extraordinary listening to you talk about him,’ said Raoul. ‘You call him a monster, you talk about his crimes, you say he wronged you and yet I sense in you the same unaccountable pity which made me despair when I saw it in Christine!…’

The Persian did not answer. Instead, he fetched a stool and set it down against the wall facing the large mirror which filled one entire side of the room. He climbed on to the stool and peered closely at the paper covering the wall, as if he was looking for something.

‘Well?’ cried Raoul, who was burning with impatience, ‘I’m waiting for you. Let’s go!’

‘Go where?’ asked the Persian without looking round.

‘Go looking for the monster! Let’s go down and find him! Didn’t you say you knew a way?’

‘I’m looking for it,’ said the Persian, and he continued to peer at the wall from close range.

‘Ah!’ the man in the hat said suddenly. ‘Here it is!’

Reaching up above his head with one finger, he pressed on a part of the patterned wallpaper. He turned and got down off the stool.

‘In half a minute, he said, ‘we shall be *on his trail!*’

He strode across the room and felt all round the large mirror.

‘No, it’s not ready to give yet…’, he muttered.

‘So we’re going out by the mirror,’ said Raoul, ‘just like Christine?’

‘You knew that Christine left this room via this mirror?’

‘I saw her with my own eyes!… I was hidden just there, behind the curtain of her inner cubicle and I saw her vanish not via the mirror but *through* it!’

‘What did you do?’

‘I thought my senses were playing tricks on me, turning my wits, making me believe it was a dream!…’

‘Or making you think it was another of the Phantom’s stage effects!’ said the Persian with a bitter laugh. ‘Oh! M. de Chagny,’ he went on, keeping his hand still pressed against the glass, ‘if it was only a ghost we were dealing with, we could leave the pistols to sleep in their case!… But now, if you please, take off your hat and put it down… just there… and button up your coat over your shirt front as tight as you can… like me… fold the lapels over… turn up your collar… we must make ourselves as invisible as possible.’

There was a brief silence. Then pushing against the mirror once more, he said:

‘There’s a delay in the release of the counterweight if the spring is operated from here. This does not happen if you’re on the other side of the wall, for then you activate the counterweight directly. The mirror swivels instantly and very fast.’

‘What counterweight?’ asked Raoul.

‘It’s what lifts this whole section of wall on to its pivot. You don’t think it moves on its own, by magic!’

The Persian grabbed Raoul and pulled him close with one hand. With the other (which held his pistol), he kept pushing against the mirror.

‘Watch closely. Any moment now you’ll see the mirror rise a few millimetres. It will move a few millimetres to the left, then a few millimetres to the right. It will then be on a pivot and free to swivel. You can do anything with a counterweight! A child could make a house turn using its little finger!… When a section of wall, no matter how much it weighs, is hoisted on to a pivot by a carefully balanced counter-weight, it is no heavier than a top spinning on its point.’

‘But it’s not turning!’ said Raoul impatiently.

‘Wait! There may be a delay! The mechanism must be rusty, though maybe the spring isn’t working.’

Then he frowned anxiously.

‘But it could be something else.’

‘What?’

‘Perhaps *he’s* cut the rope that raises the counterweight and immobilized the whole system.’

‘Why would he do that? He has no idea that we’re going down after him?’

‘Maybe *he* suspects we might. He is aware that I know how it works.’

‘Did he show you?’

‘No! I watched him from a distance, I investigated his mysterious disappearances and eventually I discovered it for myself. It’s the simplest type of secret door! The mechanism is as old as the sacred palace of Thebes with its hundred doors, or the throne room of Ecbatana, or the chamber at Delphi* where the Sybil sat on her stool…’

‘It’s still not moving!… Christine!… What about Christine?’

The Persian said coolly:

‘We will do whatever it is humanly possible to do!… But *he* has the power to stop us in our tracks at any time!’

‘So what is he then, the master who commands these walls?’

‘He commands not just the walls but the portals, doors and secret hatches as well. In my country, we called him by a name which means: *King of the Traps!*’

‘That’s how Christine spoke of him when she told me about him… with the same air of mystery and granting him the same irresistible powers!… But I find all this too much to take!… Why should these walls only obey him? I mean, he didn’t build them himself!’

‘But he did, sir!’

Raoul stared at him in disbelief. Suddenly, with one gesture the Persian warned him to be quiet and with another pointed to the mirror… It trembled, their reflections shivered as if they were looking down at themselves in rippling water and then the glass was still once more.

‘See! It’s not turning! Let’s find another way!’

‘Tonight there’s no other way!’ said the Persian in a deeply brooding voice… ‘But stay alert! And be ready to fire!’

He pointed his pistol at the mirror. Raoul followed suit. The Persian held Raoul close against his chest with his free arm. Suddenly, the mirror gave way in a blaze of blinding, dazzling reflections!… It turned like one of those revolving doors which have lately been installed in many public buildings… it swivelled, sweeping up Raoul and the Persian in its irresistible motion, removing them from the light and plunging them into utter blackness.

20
In the Belly of the Opera

'KEEP your hand up, ready to shoot!' Raoul's companion said again.

Behind them, the wall completed one full turn on its axis then closed softly behind them.

For a few moments, both men remained where they were, holding their breath.

The darkness was full of unbroken silence.

Finally, the Persian decided to make a move. Raoul heard him get down on all fours and feel around for something in the dark.

Suddenly, the shadows were pierced by the cautious light of a small dark lantern. Raoul recoiled instinctively as if to evade the attack of a hidden enemy. Then he realized that the lamp, each one of whose movements he watched carefully, was the Persian's. The small red circle wandered over the walls, up and down and all around them, missing nothing. The surfaces belonged, on the right, to a solid wall, and on the left to a wooden bulkhead which was also boarded overhead and underfoot. Raoul realized that Christine must have come this way on the night she had followed the voice of the *Angel of Music*. It had to be Erik's usual route when he came to abuse her trusting, innocent heart. Remembering what the Persian had said, he assumed it had been mysteriously constructed by the Phantom himself. But later, he would learn that Erik had discovered that a secret passage had already been dug there, a hidden corridor whose existence had long remained unknown except to him. In fact, it had been made during the Paris Commune to allow jailers to take prisoners directly to the cells which had been built in the cellars, for the rebels had occupied the Opera House following the events of 18 March.* They had used its high roofs as a launching site for the hot-air balloons which were sent into *départements* throughout France to carry their revolutionary message, and its lower depths as a state prison.

The Persian, on his knees, had put his lantern on the ground. He seemed to be busy at some task connected with the wooden boards of the walkway. Suddenly, he shaded his light.

Raoul heard a faint click and a dim square of light appeared in the floor of the passage. It was as if a window had opened onto deeper levels of the Opera House which were kept lit. Raoul lost sight of the Persian, but suddenly he felt him at his side and could hear him breathing.

'Follow me and do exactly as I do.'

Raoul was steered towards the square of light. He saw the Persian get down on his knees again and then, lowering himself into the hole, hung by his arms from the edge of the aperture and then, with his pistol between his teeth, he let himself fall.

Curiously enough, Raoul had absolute confidence in the Persian. Though he knew nothing about him and despite the fact that the little he'd said had only made a baffling situation even more mysterious, he had no hesitation in believing that at this critical juncture the Persian was on his side and against Erik. He had seemed to mean it when he'd called him a 'monster' and there was nothing suspicious about the interest his took in Raoul's predicament. And if the Persian had been planning some sinister move against him, he would hardly have given him a weapon. Anyway, nothing else mattered next to the vital business of finding Christine. Raoul did not have much freedom of action. Even if he'd had valid doubts about the Persian's motives, he would have considered himself the most despicable of cowards if he had hesitated for one instant.

Raoul too knelt, inserted himself into the trap and hung from it by both hands. He heard a voice say 'Let go!' and he dropped into the arms of the Persian who ordered him to lie down flat on the ground, closed the trap above their heads (though Raoul did not see how he managed it) and joined the Viscount on the ground. Raoul started to ask a question but the Persian put his hand over his mouth. Simultaneously he heard a voice which he recognized as belonging to Inspector Mifroid who had questioned him earlier.

Raoul and the Persian were now behind a slatted wall which hid them completely. A little further along, a flight of steps led up to a small room where the Inspector was walking up and down and asking questions, for they could hear the sound of his footsteps as well as his voice.

Their surroundings were barely visible in the faint light. But they had just emerged from the pitch black of the secret passage above them and Raoul had no difficulty making out the shape of things.

He was unable to hold back a half-gasp as he found himself looking at three dead bodies.

The first was lying on a landing of the narrow staircase which led up to the door behind which the Inspector could still be heard talking. The two others had rolled down to the foot of these stairs, arms spreadeagled. By slipping his fingers through the screen which concealed him, Raoul could have touched the hands of one of them.

'Be quiet!' hissed the Persian once more.

He too had seen the bodies and said one word in explanation:

'*Him!*'

The Inspector's voice was now much louder. He was asking the stage manager about the lighting system. That meant he must be in the 'organ pipes' or somewhere close by.

Contrary to what might be thought, especially in the context of an opera house, the 'organ pipes' has nothing to do with music-making.

In those days, the use of electricity was limited to specific stage effects and for warning bells. The enormous building, like the stage, was still lit by gas, and hydrogen was used to regulate and vary the lighting of sets. This was done by means of a special apparatus requiring a multiplicity of conduits, ducts and tubes. Hence the name: 'organ pipes'.

A cubicle was made available just next to the prompter's box for the chief lighting man who gave his subordinates orders from there and oversaw the results. It was in this cubbyhole that Mauclair sat at every performance.

But Mauclair was not at his post now and neither were his men.

'Mauclair! Mauclair!'

The stage manager's voice reverberated through the area under the stage as if it were a drum. But Mauclair did not reply.

As we said, a door opened on to the narrow flight of stairs leading down to the second level. The Inspector pushed it but it did not give: 'Damn!' he exclaimed then called to the stage manager. 'I can't open this door… is it always this stiff?'

The stage manager put his shoulder to it and forced it open. As he did so, he realized he was also pushing a human body and gave an involuntary cry: he recognized the body at once:

'It's Mauclair!'

The men who'd followed Inspector Mifroid on his visit to the 'organ pipes' stepped forward anxiously.

'Poor devil! He's dead!' gasped the shocked stage manager.

It took a lot to surprise Mifroid who was already bending over the body.

'No he isn't,' he said.

'He's drunk!

It's not the same thing.'

'It's the first time,' said the stage manager.

'In that case, it's very likely he's been drugged.'

The Inspector stood up, went down a few steps and suddenly said:

'Look!'

The light of a small red lamp revealed two more bodies at the foot of the stairs. The stage manager identified them as Mauclair's assistants… The Inspector went down to them and felt for a pulse.

'Dead to the world,' he said. 'Very curious! Clearly an outsider has been tampering with the lights… and it is equally obvious that this unknown person was working with the kidnapper!… But what's the point of abducting an opera singer on stage, in the middle of a performance?… Really, I'd say someone likes a challenge! You'd better send for the house doctor.'

And the Inspector repeated: 'Very odd! A very odd business!'

Then he turned back and, facing into the small room, spoke to people whom neither Raoul nor the Persian could see from where they were placed.

'What do you make of it all, gentlemen?' he asked. 'You're the only ones who haven't said what you think. Come now! You must have an opinion?'

Raoul and the Persian watched as two faces appeared above the landing: only their faces were visible from that angle. They wore frightened expressions and belonged to Messrs Richard and Moncharmin. They heard Moncharmin say nervously:

'Things are happening here, Inspector, which we cannot explain.'

The two faces disappeared.

'Thank you for that information, gentlemen,' said Mifroid ironically.

But the stage manager, his chin resting in the hollow of his right hand in the classic pose of the Thinker, said:

'This isn't the first time Mauclair has fallen asleep on the job. I remember finding him once snoring in his cubbyhole next to his snuffbox.'

'Was that recently?' asked Mifroid, carefully wiping the lenses of his spectacles, for he was short-sighted. The most beautiful eyes often are.

'Let me think!' said the stage manager. 'Yes… not very long ago… I have it!… It was the night when La Carlotta, you know, Inspector, croaked!…'

'Really? The night when La Carlotta got that toad in her throat?'

Mifroid put his newly cleaned spectacles back on his nose and peered at the stage manager intently, as if trying to read his thoughts.

'So Mauclair takes snuff, does he?' he asked casually.

'Oh yes, Inspector… And there, on that ledge, is his snuffbox… He's likes his snuff!…'

'So do I!' said Mifroid and he put the snuffbox in his pocket.

Raoul and the Persian, their presence unsuspected, watched while stagehands removed the bodies. The Inspector and the rest of the hangers-on followed them back upstairs. Several minutes later, they could be heard walking around on the stage above.

When they were alone, the Persian motioned to Raoul to stand, which he did. But when he did not hold his hand up level with his eyes, ready to shoot, as his companion was careful to do, the Persian told him sharply to keep his arm crooked and never drop his guard whatever happened.

'But that puts a pointless strain on the arm!' said Raoul, 'so that if I fire my aim won't be steady.'

'If that's a problem, change hands,' suggested the Persian.

'I can't shoot with my left hand!'

To this, the Persian responded with a strange pronouncement which was hardly calculated to light the torch of understanding in the younger man's brain.

'*It is not about firing with your right hand or your left but about keeping one hand up, with the arm at right angles, as if you are going to pull the trigger of your pistol. But the pistol isn't important. If you prefer, keep it in your pocket.*'

And he added: 'You must understand this or I cannot be held responsible for what might happen! It's a matter of life and death! Now, say nothing and follow me!'

They were then on the second level down. By the light of lamps fixed at distant intervals, their flames imprisoned in glass, Raoul was able to see only a tiny part of the colossal, fairyland grotto which lies beneath of the stage of the Paris Opera. It can be as enchanting as a child's marionette show or as breath-stopping as a bottomless pit.

There are five levels in all and they are intimidating. They replicate all the stage sets and traps large and small. But sliders and cuts in the stage floor are replaced here by rails. Trapdoors are supported by a framework of cross timbers. Props and piles resting on cast-iron or stone dies, templates and pockets of hard core form a succession of trusses which allow clear passage for hoists and other kinds of stage machinery. They are given extra stability by linking them together and anchoring them to iron brackets or by improvised clamps. Winches, rollers and counterweights are widely distributed throughout these lower levels. They are used to move large pieces of scenery, handle transformation scenes or enable performers in spectacle plays to vanish as if by magic. According to Messrs X, Y and Z, in their absorbing study of Charles Garnier's masterpiece, it is from these lower depths that mere mortals are changed into handsome knights and hideous old witches into fairy queens bursting with youth. Satan rises from these lower regions and returns hither by the same token. The flames of hell reach out of them and choirs of demons take up their abode there… and ghosts are in their natural element.

Raoul followed the Persian, doing everything he was told and making no effort to understand the actions he was expected to perform, for he kept telling himself that the Persian was his only hope.

What would he have done without him in this hellish labyrinth?

Would he not have been brought to a stop at every turn by this furious tangle of beams and ropes? Would he have been caught in this gigantic spider's web with no chance of ever getting free?

And even if he had been able to find a way through the network of cords and counterweights which kept proliferating as he moved forward, did he not run the very real risk of falling into one of the apparently bottomless holes which suddenly opened under his feet?

Down they went… down and down.

Now they were on the third level and their progress was still lit by distant lamps.

The further they descended, the more cautious the Persian became… He kept turning round to check that Raoul was following orders and keeping one arm up. He showed him his own hand, which had no gun in it but was raised and ready to fire as if it had been holding his pistol.

Suddenly a loud voice rooted them to the spot. Someone somewhere above their heads was shouting:

'All door-boys to the stage at once! The Inspector wants to see them!'

They heard the tramp of feet and shadows glided past them through the darkness. The Persian pulled Raoul behind a wooden beam… In front of them and over their heads, they saw stooped old men pass by, bent by the years and the accumulated weight of the opera scenery they had shifted. Some could hardly drag themselves along… others, bent over by force of habit and with their hands outstretched, reached in the half-light for doors to close.

They were the 'door-boys… superannuated former stagehands on whom humane managements had taken pity. They had employed them as door-shutters below and above the stage. They came and went throughout the building, shutting traps and doors. They were also known as in those days (I believe they are all dead now) as 'draught snuffers'. Draughts are very bad for the voice, wherever they come from.[1]

The Persian and Raoul greeted this development with nods of relief, for it removed the presence of unwelcome witnesses. Some of these aged door-boys, having little or nothing to do and often no homes to go to, never left the Opera House, through laziness or lack of money, and slept there. It would be all too easy to trip over them or wake them up thus inviting awkward questions. For the time being, Inspector Mifroid's inquiries freed them from the danger of any such unwanted encounters.

But they were not allowed to enjoy their solitude for long…

Other shadows were now coming down by the same route the door-boys had gone up. They all carried small lamps which they swung high and low, examining everything they passed and clearly looking for something or someone.

'Dammit!' muttered the Persian, 'I can't think what they're looking for but they might find us!… Quick!… Let's move!… And keep your hand raised, ready to shoot!… Bend your arm more, that's it!… keep the hand level with the eyes, as if you are fighting a duel and waiting for the signal to fire!… Leave your pistol in your pocket!… Now come on, let's go! (He was now leading Raoul down to the fourth level)… don't forget, same height as the eyes, a matter of life and death!… Over there, those steps! (Down they went to the fifth level)… And a duel is what it is, sir, and what a duel!'

Having reached the bottom (and fifth level), the Persian breathed more freely… He seemed to feel safer now than only a few minutes before when they had halted on the third level. Even so, he still kept his arm well up!…

Raoul used the moment to wonder—though without adding any further comment, for this was hardly the time—to wonder, as I say, in silence at this strange version of self-defence which consisted of keeping your pistol in your pocket while your gun hand stayed free and ready to shoot as if you actually were holding the weapon in your hand at eye level, in the position required of duellists in those days as they waited for the signal to fire.

To which Raoul added this thought: 'I clearly remember him saying: "These are the most accurate and reliable pistols I ever owned."' It seemed perfectly reasonable to ask therefore: 'What is the point of having an accurate weapon you can rely on if you have no intention of using it?'

But the Persian interrupted his unfinished thoughts. Gesturing to him to remain where he was, he cautiously went back up several of the steps by which they had come down. He came back more quickly and rejoined Raoul.

'We're being stupid,' he murmured. 'We'll soon be rid of those men with lamps… It's just the firemen doing their rounds!…'[1]

They stayed where they were, on the alert, for at least five long minutes. Then the Persian motioned Raoul towards the steps they'd just come down. Suddenly, he brought him to a stop.

In front of them, the darkness seemed to stir.

'Lie flat on the ground!' whispered the Persian.

The two men lay face down and not a moment too soon.

A shadowy figure which was not carrying a lamp, a shadow among the shadows, was bearing down on them.

It passed so close they could have touched it.

They felt the warmth from his cloak on their faces.

For they could now make the figure out clearly enough to see that the man was wearing a cloak which covered him from neck to feet. On his head he wore a soft felt hat.

He moved off, brushing the walls at each side with his feet and at intervals poking a toe into a dark corner.

'That was a close shave!… We were lucky to get away with it!… That shadow knows me… twice he's caught me and taken me straight to the office of the Directors.'

'Is he part of the theatre's security service?' asked Raoul.

'He's something worse than that!' said the Persian, but did not explain further.[1]

'Was it… *him*?'

'*Him?*… No!… provided *he* doesn't come at you from behind, you always see his yellow eyes!… It's one advantage we have in the dark. But if he creeps up on us from behind… by stealth… we will die unless we keep our hands up, at eye level, as if we are about to shoot!…'

The Persian had barely finished outlining once more why this mattered when a grotesque face suddenly appeared from nowhere and confronted both men.

It was a whole face… not just a pair of glowing eyes… A complete, luminous face… an entire, unabbreviated, flaring face!… A fiery face which was coming towards them… at head height… but it had no body!…

A face which blazed!…

It appeared in the night like a flame in the shape of a man's face!

'Ah!' said the Persian through gritted teeth. 'This is the first time I've seen it!… So Papin, the fireman, wasn't seeing things after all! He really did see it!… But what is this flame exactly? It's not *him!*… but perhaps *he* sent it!… Be careful!… For God's sake, keep your hand up, level with your eye… keep it up!'

The flaming face which could have belonged to a devil from hell, a demon of fire and brimstone, was still bearing down on the two men at head height. It was unsupported by a body.

'Maybe *he* made this face come at us from the front so that he can surprise us from behind!… or from the side!… you can never tell with *him!*… I thought I knew all his tricks!… But this one is new to me!… We must get away!… Can't be too careful!… Remember: keep your hand well up!…'

They turned and ran along the underground passage which unrolled before them.

After a few seconds which seemed more like long, long minutes, they stopped.

'It's odd,' said the Persian. '*He* doesn't often come here! He's not interested in this side of the building!… It doesn't lead to the lake nor his house by the lake!… But perhaps he knows *we are getting close!*… although I did promise that I would let him alone in future and stay out of his business!…'

And so saying, he turned round. Raoul followed suit.

They could still see the blazing head behind them. It had followed them… and it must have run as fast or faster than them, for they had a feeling that it was closer now.

At the same instant, they were aware of a sound which they were quite unable to identify. They simply registered the fact that the sound seemed to move and grow louder as the flame with a man's face came nearer. It consisted of creaks or rather squeaks, as if a thousand fingernails were scratching at a blackboard. It was like the piercing *skreek* made by a piece of grit embedded in the stick of chalk as it writes on the board.

They went on retreating, but the flaming face came on relentlessly and began to gain on them. They could make out its features very clearly now. The eyes were round and staring, the nose slightly crooked and the mouth large, with a pendulous lower lip. It was like the eyes, nose and lip of the moon when it is low and red, blood red.

How could this moon float head high through the darkness, as it seemed, without visible support, without a body to hold it up? How did it move so fast, so unwaveringly, with eyes that looked neither right nor left? And what was the source of all the skreeking, creaking and squeaking which accompanied it?

The Persian and Raoul suddenly found that they could retreat no further. They flattened themselves against the wall, not knowing what to expect from the inexplicable blazing head and, not least, from the noise which was now louder, more *teeming*, more alive and more *myriad*, for it was made up of hundreds of small sounds which swarmed in the shadows, under the fiery head.

The head kept coming… getting closer and louder!… and then it was on them!…

The two men, their backs pressed hard against the wall, felt their hair stand on end in terror, because now they knew what the pullulating noise was! In the darkness, it rode on the backs of countless rushing wavelets which rolled faster than the waves of an incoming tide race across the sands, little night-waves foaming in the moonlight, the light of a moon that was a flaming head!

The wavelets lapped their shoes, rose up their legs, unstoppably. Raoul and the Persian could no longer hold back their terrified screams of shock, pain and horror.

There was no way now that they could go on holding their hands at eye level—in the position required of duellists by the code of the time. They dropped their arms and started beating their legs to repulse small, gleaming, stinging clusters, innumerable bundles of legs and nails and claws and teeth.

Raoul and the Persian were on the point of losing consciousness, like Papin the firefighter. But the blazing head stopped and turned when they started screaming. And now it spoke:

'Don't move!… Keep still!… And most partic'lar, don't follow me!… I'm the rat-catcher!… Lemme pass with me rats!…'

And the fiery head was gone, swallowed up by the darkness. But as it went, the passageway was lit by the way the rat-catcher was holding his dark lantern. To avoid scaring the rats in front of him, he had previously pointed the lantern at himself, lighting up his own head. But now, to make faster progress, he lit up the black tunnel ahead of him… He strode on, driving the tide of leaping, squeaking rats and their multifarious noise…

Shaken but safe now, Raoul and the Persian breathed more freely.

'I should have remembered,' said the Persian. 'Erik told me about the rat-catcher but he never said he looked like that… It's odd that I never came across him myself.[1]

He went on with a sigh:

'I honestly thought it was one of the monster's tricks!… But it couldn't have been!… He never comes anywhere near here!'

'Does that mean we're still a long way from the lake?' asked Raoul. 'When are we going to get there?… Come on!… Let's go!… When we reach the lake, we'll call Christine's name, we'll shout, we'll shake the walls!… She'll hear us!… And so will *he!*… And since you've met him before, we'll talk sense to him!'

'Don't be such a young fool!' said the Persian. 'We'll never get inside his house from the lake!'

'Why not?'

'Because that's where he's placed all his defences!… Even I have never managed to get across to the bank on the other side!… where the house is!… First you must cross the lake, and it's well guarded!… I'm afraid that more than one of the men—old stagehands and door-boys—who have disappeared and never been seen again were only trying to get across the lake!… It's horrible!… I nearly got caught that way myself!… If the monster hadn't recognized me in the nick of time… A word of advice, Viscount: don't go near the lake!… And if you hear *the Voice beneath the water*, the Voice of the Siren, block up your ears!'

'If that's how it is,' said Raoul, reacting with impatience and fury, 'what on earth are we doing here?… If you can't help Christine, you can at least let me die for her!'

The Persian tried to calm the younger man.

'Look, there's only one way we can save Christine Daaé, take it from me; we have to get inside his house before the monster finds out.'

'You reckon there's a hope of that?'

'Oh, if there wasn't, I would never have come looking for you.'

'But how can we get into the house without crossing the lake?'

'From the third level which we were unfortunately forced to leave… We'll go back there now… I shall tell you where,' said the Persian in a much altered voice, 'I shall show you the exact place… It's between a farmhouse and part of the scenery from *Le Roi de Lahore*… It's the spot where Joseph Buquet died…'

'You mean the chief stage-setter who was found hanged?'

'Quite so!' added the Persian in a strange voice. 'And they never found the rope that hanged him!… But let's be off!… Don't forget, sir: spirits and defences up!… Now where are we exactly?'

The Persian relit his dark lantern. He shone the beam along the length of two cavernous passages which crossed at right angles. The roof was lost in darkness.

'We must', he said, 'be in the area where the water services are now situated… Those boilers don't look as if they're lit.'

He went first, picking his way, stopping suddenly when he feared they might run into some *hydraulician*. At one point, they shrank back to shield themselves from the glare of an underground forge which was being put out by those same 'demons' half-glimpsed by Christine as she passed this way on day one of her first spell of captivity.

In this way they eventually made their way back to the central area directly under the stage.

By now they had to be at the lowest point of the catchment 'basin' and therefore very deep down, for it should be borne in mind that when the Opera House was built workers had dug out a vast cavity some *fifty feet below the level of the water table in that part of town.* All the water had been pumped out… So much was removed that to have some idea of the volume extracted by the pumps, you need to picture a cube the area of the square court of the Louvre and one and a half times as high as Notre-Dame. Despite this, there was no way of eliminating a lake.

The Persian felt part of a wall and said:

'Unless I'm very much mistaken, this wall might well be part of the house by the lake!'

He went on tapping one wall of the 'basin'. Perhaps the reader might find it useful to know how the bottom and sides of this structure had been built.

To prevent the water in which the foundations stood from permanent, direct contact with the walls which supported the levels containing the stage apparatus and equipment—all the timber, joinery, ironwork, painted scenery which had to be protected against damp—*the architect had been obliged to build a separate skin all round it.*

It took a whole year to complete this 'double skin'. The wall the Persian had tapped as he told Raoul about the house on the lake was the inner skin. To anyone familiar with the architecture of the building, the Persian's action would have indicated that *Erik's mysterious house had been built inside the double skin* which consisted of a watertight caisson lined by a wall of brick, a very substantial layer of cement and a third wall several metres thick.*

Hearing what the Persian said, Raoul pressed one ear eagerly to the wall and listened.

But he could hear nothing… nothing except the sound of footsteps on the wooden floors of the theatre above his head.

The Persian darkened his lantern again.

'Don't forget!… Keep one hand up!… But now, no more talking!… We are going to make another attempt to get into his house.'

He led the way to the flight of steps which they had recently come down. They went up them again, slowly, stopping at each step, concentrating on the darkness and the silence.

And then they were on the third level.

The Persian motioned Raoul to kneel and it was by crawling on both knees and one hand—the other held in the recommended position—that they reached the far wall. Against it leaned a huge, abandoned half-painted backdrop from the set of *Le Roi de Lahore*. Next to it was a flat. Between the backcloth and the flat, there was just enough room for a body… a body which had been found hanging there… the body of Joseph Buquet.

The Persian, still on hand and knees, stopped and listened.

For a moment, he seemed to hesitate. He glanced at Raoul, then his eyes moved up, over the younger man's head, towards the second level above. The faint gleam of a lantern came through a crack in the floorboards.

Evidently the Persian was bothered by it.

Eventually, he shook his head and made up his mind.

He squeezed between the backcloth and the flat from *Le Roi de Lahore.*

Raoul was just behind.

With his free hand the Persian felt the wall. Raoul saw him press hard on the wall exactly as he had pressed on the wallpaper in Christine's dressing room…

Then a block of stone turned…

An opening appeared in the wall…

The Persian took his pistol from his pocket and made a sign that Raoul was to do the same. He cocked the pistol.

Resolutely he crawled, still on his knees, into the hole in the wall left by the stone as it turned.

Raoul, who had wanted to go first, had to be content to follow.

The hole was narrow. Almost at once, the Persian suddenly stopped. Raoul heard him feeling all around the stonework. Then he unshuttered his dark lantern again. He craned forward, examined something beneath him and then quickly closed the shutter. Raoul just caught what he whispered:

'There's a drop of a few metres. We mustn't make a noise. Take your boots off.'

The Persian was already starting to remove his own. These he passed to Raoul.

'Put them further down the wall… We'll retrieve them on the way out.'[1]

Then the Persian inched his way forward. Still on his knees, he turned round until he was facing Raoul.

'I shall hang by my hands from the edge of the stone,' he said, 'and I'll let myself drop *into his house*. You must do exactly the same. Don't be afraid. I'll catch you.'

The Persian proceeded to do what he said. From somewhere below him, Raoul soon heard a dull thud which was obviously made by the Persian as he landed. He experienced a momentary pang of fear: would the noise betray their presence?

But more alarming for Raoul than this muffled thud was the complete absence of any other sound. How was it possible? According to the Persian, they were now inside the walls of the house by the lake, and he could not hear any sign of Christine!… not a cry!… not a call for help!… not a groan!… Ye Gods! Had they come too late?…

Then it was Raoul's turn. Scraping his knees on the wall and clinging to the stone with nervous fingers, he let himself fall.

Immediately, he was grabbed by a pair of arms.

'It's me!' whispered the Persian. 'Don't say a word!'

They stood where they were, with ears straining.

Never had the darkness surrounding them seemed more thick and impenetrable.

Raoul dug his nails into his lips to stop himself crying out: 'Christine!… It's me!… Answer me, Christine, are you still alive?'

Again the Persian opened the shutter of his lantern. He shone the beam above their heads, over the walls, looking for the opening through which they had come and not finding it…

'Ah!' he said. 'The stone closed by itself.'

Then the beam of light slid down the wall until it reached the ground.

The Persian bent down and picked something up, a length of thin cord of some description which he examined closely for a brief moment before throwing it down in horror.

'*The Punjabi bowstring!*'*

'What is it?'

'It is very likely', said the Persian with a shudder, 'what everyone's been looking for: the cord with which Joseph Buquet was hanged!'

Then, seized by a sudden surge of anxiety, he shone the small red circle from his lantern all over the walls… only to reveal a bizarre sight, the trunk of a tree complete with leaves which seemed to be alive… its branches rose up the wall and vanished into the darkness of the ceiling.

The narrowness of the beam made it difficult to make out the shapes of things… they saw part of a branch… a leaf… another leaf… and next to it, nothing at all… nothing except a beam of light which seemed to be a reflection of the lantern itself… Raoul reached out his hand for the 'nothing at all', for the reflected light…

'Hello!' he said. 'This isn't a wall, it's a mirror!'

'Correct!' said the Persian, in a voice filled with dread. He clasped the hand which held his pistol to his head on which a cold sweat had broken out.

Then he added:

'We've landed in *his* torture chamber!'

21

Concerning the interesting and instructive ordeals undergone by the Persian in the belly of the Opera

The Persian's Tale

THE PERSIAN has left his own account of how he had tried, always in vain until that night, to get into the house by crossing the lake; how he discovered the back way in from the third level; and, finally, how he and the Viscount de Chagny were pitted against the Phantom's hellish imagination in the *torture chamber*. We here print his chronicle in full, as it was written (in circumstances which will be made clear later). I reproduce it *in extenso* because I do not believe it would be right to ignore the personal trials of the Daroga[1] in his investigation of the house by the lake before he and Raoul—literally—fell into it. If, briefly at the outset, the preamble, however fascinating, seems to take us away from the torture chamber, we will quickly return to it, and with advantage, for we will have had vital matters explained to us together with insights into the attitudes and methods of the Persian which might otherwise have seemed highly unusual.

It was the first time I had ever been inside the house by the lake (wrote the Persian). Several times I had asked the King of Traps—that was the name by which we, in Persia, knew Erik—to open its dark doors to me. He always refused. I whose job it was to discover all I could about his stratagems and contrivances had finally to resort to furtive methods to break in. Ever since I traced Erik to the Opera, where he seemed to have taken up permanent residence, I had often caught sight of him in the corridors of the theatre, in the passages underground and even, when he thought he was alone, on the bank of the lake when he would get into a small boat and row himself directly to the wall opposite. But the darkness in which he seemed perpetually wrapped was always too dense for me to see the exact spot where he operated a secret door in the wall. Curiosity plus an awful presentiment which stemmed from certain things the monster had told me, led me one day when I too thought I was unobserved, to get into the boat and head for the part of the wall through which I had seen Erik vanish. It was then that I first encountered the Siren who guarded the approach to his house. The spell she cast on me proved to be almost my undoing in circumstances which I shall now relate.

I had got no distance from the shore when the silence through which I moved over the water was imperceptibly overlaid by a hushed, melodious whisper. It seemed to be everywhere, and it felt like breathing and sounded like singing. It rose soothingly from the depths of the lake and enveloped me by some cunning process which I could not explain. It followed me, went where I went, and it was so silky-smooth on the ear that I felt no fear. The very opposite. I felt such an urge to get close to the source of such sweet, captivating harmony that I leaned over the side of the boat, until I was almost touching the water, for there was no doubt in my mind that the singing was coming from there. I was now in the middle of the lake and alone in the boat. The voice—for it was now distinctly and undeniably a voice—was by my side, on the water. I leaned further… and further… The lake was perfectly still and the shaft of moonlight which came through the airvent in the Rue Scribe revealed nothing on its surface which was glossy and black as ink. I pummelled my ears in case I was hearing things but quickly bowed to the overwhelming fact that no buzzing in the ears could ever be as sweet as the melodious whisper which pursued me and now began to lead me on.

If I had a superstitious mind or were easily taken in by tales of the supernatural, I would surely have thought I was dealing with some siren whose mission was to lure any traveller bold enough to venture across the water surrounding the house by the lake. But, praise be! I hail from a nation too infatuated with fantasy not to recognize it when I see it. I had studied the subject in depth when I was younger and knew that, even with basic skills, anyone with half an idea of what he's about can easily wreak havoc with the defenceless imaginations of men and women.

I had no doubt that I was being tested by one of Erik's new inventions. But I repeat: the illusion was so perfect that as I leaned over the side of my small boat I was less intent on my wish to discover how I was being fooled than on my urge to surrender to its charm.

I leaned further… and further… until I almost capsized the boat.

Suddenly two powerful arms rose from the water, grabbed me by the neck and began to drag me under the surface with unstoppable force. I would certainly have been done for if I hadn't had just enough time to cry out. Erik heard and recognized my voice.

For the arms were his and instead of drowning me as he had intended, he swam with me back to the shore.

'Do you realize how rash that was?' he asked as he stood over me, streaming with water from that diabolical pool. 'Why were you trying to get into my home? I didn't invite you. I don't want you there, I don't want anybody there! Why did you save my life if it was to make it unbearable? It is true that you once did me a great service. Yet some day maybe Erik will forget it, and you know that there is no power on earth that can limit Erik's desires, not even Erik himself!'

He continued to speak but all I wanted was to know how exactly he worked what I already called *the Siren Trap.* He was prepared to satisfy my curiosity, for Erik, who is an authentic monster—that's what I reckon he is and I had plenty of opportunity, unfortunately, to see him at work in Persia—still in some ways has the mind of a precocious, conceited adolescent. When he has amazed the crowd, he has to show what a miraculously inventive mind he has.

He laughed and held up the long stem of a reed.

'It's such an old trick!' he said, 'but it's just the thing for breathing and humming under water! It's something I taught to pirates when I was in Tonkin. They can stay concealed for hours on end at the bottom of rivers!'[1]

I rounded on him:

'And your trick damned well nearly killed me… and may have killed others before me!'

He did not reply but stood there with that look of childish defiance which I know only too well.

I refused to be intimidated and told him plainly:

'Have you forgotten what you promised me, Erik? No more killing!'

'Who am I supposed to have killed?' he said amiably.

'You're a villain!…' I cried. 'Have you forgotten *the Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*?'

'I have,' he replied, suddenly sobered. 'But I prefer to forget all that. Still, I did make the sultana laugh.'

'All that is over,' I said, 'it belongs to the past… and this is the present… and you are answerable to me for what you do in the present. If I'd wanted, you wouldn't have lived to see it!… so don't you forget, Erik: I saved your neck!'

And I took advantage of the turn the conversation had taken to raise a matter which had been on my mind for some time.

'Erik,' I said, 'swear that you…'

'Swear?' he said. 'But you know I never keep my word! I only swear when I want to fool stupid people.'

'Tell me… Come on, you surely can tell me!'

'Tell you what?'

'About the chandelier!'

'What about it?'

'You know what I'm talking about!'

'Oh!' he sniggered, 'the *chandelier!*… All right, I'll tell you!… That was none of my doing!… It was just old and worn!'

Erik was even more terrifying when he laughed. He jumped into the boat leering in a sinister way which sent shivers up my spine.

'Very worn, Daroga! It was dangerously worn… It fell of its own accord… It made a great big bang!… And now, a word or two of advice, Daroga: dry yourself or you'll catch cold!… never get into my boat again!… and above all never try to get into my house… I'm not always there as I was tonight… It would grieve me

to have to dedicate my *Requiem Mass* to you, Daroga!'

With these words, and a final sneer, he stood up in the back of the boat and, agile as a monkey, he swung on the oars. He loomed with the menace of a wrecking rock, except that rocks don't have yellow eyes. Soon, all I could see were those eyes and finally even they disappeared into the gloom which settled back over the lake.

It was on that day that I gave up any idea of breaking into his house from the lake! The entrance on that side was clearly far too well guarded, especially now that he'd seen that I knew about it. But I suspected that there was another way in. More than once I'd followed Erik down to the third level where he would suddenly vanish, though I had been watching him closely, and I could never work out how he managed it. I cannot say too often that since I had found Erik ensconced in the Opera I had been living in a state of permanent fear of his murderous impulses, not because I was afraid for myself but because of what he might do to others.[1] Whenever there was an accident in which someone was killed, I never failed to wonder: 'Could it be Erik?…' just as others would say: 'The Phantom did it!' How many times have I heard those words from people who spoke them with a smile on their lips! The fools! If they'd known that the Phantom was a creature of flesh and blood and far more dangerous than their inane ideas about ghosts, believe me, they'd have smiled on the other side of their faces!… If they'd only known what Erik was capable of, especially on a battleground like the Opera!… and if they'd only known how full of forebodings my real thoughts were…'

My life was no longer my own!… Erik had given me his solemn assurance that he had changed and that he had become a really good man *ever since he had been loved for himself*, words which left me totally baffled. But I could not repress a shudder whenever I thought of the monster. His horrifying, unique, repulsive ugliness placed him outside human society, and I had good reason to think that, as a direct consequence, he no longer felt he owed the human race anything. The way he had spoken of *being in love* merely increased my fears, for I saw in this new development which he spoke of in that boastful way he had, the seed of new horrors more vile than anything than had gone before. I knew to what sublime heights Erik's sufferings could rise but also to what abysmal depths they could sink. What he had said to me—vague hints threatening the most appalling disasters—continued to dominate my worst thoughts.

On the other hand, I had discovered that a strange spiritual bond had sprung up between him and Christine Daaé. Concealed in the lumber room next to the diva's dressing room, I had been present at a number of amazing musical sessions which clearly left Christine in a state of ecstasy, though I had never suspected that Erik's voice—which he could roll like thunder or modulate into the sweet tones of angels—could make anyone forget how stupendously repulsive he was. I only realized my mistake when I discovered that Christine had never seen him!

I found an opportunity to slip into her dressing room and, recalling the different kind of lessons he had once given me, I had no trouble discovering the secret spring which made the wall with the mirror swivel. I saw how, by means of hollow bricks and vents which served as speaking tubes, he had made sure Christine could hear him as clearly as if he were standing by her side. On that occasion, I also discovered the secret tunnel which led to the spring which trickled out of the wall, the cell dug out by the Communards and the trap which acted as Erik's short cut down to the third level.

A few days later, I was amazed to learn with my own eyes and ears that Erik and Christine Daaé had met. I found the monster with Christine Daaé by the spring in the Communards' tunnel (it bubbles out of the wall at the far end). He was bathing her temples, for she had fainted. A white horse, the one used in *Le Prophète*, which had disappeared from the Opera's underground stables, was standing patiently next to them. I revealed myself. The effect was terrifying. I saw sparks fly out from those yellow eyes and before I could say a word I was hit on the head and was left dazed. When I came to, Erik, Christine and the horse had gone. The situation was unambiguous: the poor girl was now a prisoner in the house by the lake. I did not hesitate and, despite the very real danger to myself, resolved to return to the lake. I hid on the bank and stayed there for twenty-four hours, waiting for the monster to emerge, for I was pretty sure that he would come out sooner or later to fetch fresh supplies. I should add, in this context, that whenever he went out on to the streets of Paris or dared appear in public, he would cover the horrible hole where his nose should have been with a false one made of papier-mâché to which a moustache was attached. Of course it did not hide his macabre disfigurement entirely, for as he passed by people would whisper behind his back: 'Look, it's Death warmed up!' But at least it made him almost—I repeat, almost—bearable to look at.

And so I watched from the side of the lake—Lake Avernus, as he'd ironically called it several times within my hearing—and, finding the wait tedious, I got to thinking: 'He's gone out by another door, the one on the third level.' I'd got this far when I heard a low splashing in the dark, saw a pair of yellow eyes blazing like burning brands, and then the boat ran on to the shore. Erik stepped out of it and walked straight towards me.

'You've been here for twenty-four hours,' he said, 'and I don't like it! I'm warning you: all this will end in tears! And it will be your fault! I have been enormously patient with you… You thought you were following me, *you stupid, stupid man* (his words) whereas *I* have been following *you!* I know everything you know about me. Yesterday in the Communards' tunnel, *which is my territory*, I let you live. But I'll say this just once: never let me see you here again! You have behaved recklessly, by God! I'm beginning to wonder if you can take telling!'

He was so furious that for the moment I was careful not to interrupt. When he'd stopped blowing like a grampus, he spoke explicitly of the havoc he could cause, thereby confirming my blackest thoughts.

'You must learn once and for all!… you hear?… once and for all!… to take me at my word! Given your carelessness—you've already been arrested twice by the man in the soft felt hat who didn't know what you were doing down here and hauled you up before the Directors who assumed you were some weird Persian fascinated by magic and stage effects (I was there… yes, in the office; you should know by now that I am everywhere)—given your sheer recklessness, I say, people will wonder what you're up to in this place… then they'll find out that you're looking for Erik… and then they'll all want to look for him too… and they'll discover the house by the lake… and then it will be Armageddon!… I shan't answer for the consequences!…'

Again he snorted like a grampus.

'I won't be held responsible! Unless Erik's secrets remain inviolable, then *the outlook is bleak for many of the human race!* That's all I wanted to say to you and unless you are *even more stupid than you look* (his words again) once should be enough! Unless, that is, you just won't listen!'

He had sat down in the stern of his small boat and drummed one heel on the wood while he waited for my answer. I simply said:

'I didn't come here looking for Erik!…'

'For who, then?'

'You know very well! For Christine Daaé!'

He replied:

'I'm perfectly entitled to invite her to my own house. She loves me for myself.'

'That's not true,' I said. 'You kidnapped her and are holding her against her will!'

'Listen!' he said, 'will you promise you'll stay out of my business if I can prove that she loves me for what I am?'

'I promise,' I said without hesitating, for I believed that it was something no monster like him could ever prove.

'It's a bargain! It's straightforward. Christine Daaé will walk out of here whenever she likes and will then come back to me… Yes, she'll return because she wants to… return of her own accord because she loves me for myself!…'

'I doubt that very much… But you are duty-bound to let her go.'

'Bound by duty, you *oaf*? (his word) I am bound only by my will!… It is my wish that she shall leave!… and she will come back… she loves me!… And we shall marry, this I swear… we'll be married in the Madeleine,* you *imbecile!*… Do you believe me now?… My *Wedding Mass* is already written… You'll see… such a *Kyrie*!…'

With a change of rhythm, he began beating time on the bottom of the boat with one heel and over it he sang softly: *Kyrie! Kyrie! Kyrie Eleison!*… You'll see!… Wait till you hear it!'

'Listen,' I said, 'I'll believe you if I see Christine Daaé walk out of your house and return of her own free will.'

'And you'll stop meddling in my life?'

'Agreed,' I said.

'Very well. You shall have your wish tonight… Come to the masked ball. Christine and I will both put in an appearance… Then conceal yourself in the lumber room next to Christine's dressing room. She will be there by then and won't be happy until she's on her way back through the Communards' tunnel.'

'Agreed!'

If I witnessed such a thing with my own eyes, I'd have no choice but to back down. Beauty is entitled to fall in love with the Beast, especially if he seduces her with music and she is one of the finest singers of the day.

'But now, get out of here! I have to go outside. There are things I need to buy!…'

I went, still fearing for Christine but chiefly worried by a very alarming thought prompted by what he had said about my 'recklessness'.

I kept wondering: 'How will all this end?' And although I am temperamentally inclined to be fatalistic, I could not help feeling vaguely but genuinely apprehensive when I thought of the incredible responsibility I had accepted the day I saved the neck of a monster who now posed a very real threat to *many members of the human race.*

To my huge amazement, everything turned out exactly as he had said. Christine Daaé walked out of the house by the lake several times and returned without any obvious sign of coercion. I tried to stop dwelling on what was one of love's great mysteries. But I found it extremely difficult—given the nature of his threats—to stop thinking about Erik. But I resigned myself to a policy of extreme prudence and did not make the mistake of going back to the lake nor of using the Communards' tunnel. But the thought of that secret entrance on the third level down obsessed me. I went back there several times during the day, when I knew it was usually deserted. I put in long hours of watching and waiting, twiddling my thumbs behind part of the set of *Le Roi de Lahore* which had been left there for some obscure reason, for *Le Roi de Lahore* was not performed very often. Such patience had in the long run to be rewarded. One day I saw the monster coming my way. He was crawling on all fours. I was sure he couldn't see me. He squeezed between the set and the painted backcloth, made straight for the wall and pressed on a spot, the exact location of which I saw from my distance. It released a spring which made one stone block swing open to reveal a narrow passage. He disappeared into the passage and the stone closed behind him. I had discovered the monster's secret. With it, I would now be able to enter the house by the lake when the time came.

Just to make sure, I waited at least half an hour and then tried releasing the catch. It worked just as it had done for Erik. But knowing that he was inside, I made no attempt to crawl along the passage after him. Besides, the thought that I might be found there by Erik suddenly reminded me of what had happened to Joseph Buquet and, not wishing to risk compromising my discovery which might be the salvation of *many members of the human race*, I hurriedly left the lower levels after carefully putting the stone back in place. The mechanism was exactly the same as those I had known back in Persia.

As you can imagine, I was still very intrigued by Erik's relationship with Christine Daaé, not out of any unhealthy curiosity but because of the one awful thought which was never far from my mind: 'If', I mused, 'Erik finds out that she does not love him for himself, there's no knowing what he might do.' I never stopped patrolling the Opera House, taking every precaution, and soon discovered the truth about the monster's doomed love.

If he filled Christine's mind with anything, it was with terror, but her heart belonged entirely to the Viscount de Chagny. While the two of them roamed playfully like some sweet, engaged couple, through the upper levels of the theatre—where they could be free of the monster—they never suspected that someone was watching them. I was prepared to do anything: I would kill the monster if I had to and settle with the law later. But Erik never appeared, though I was not particularly reassured by this.

I must tell you how I read the situation. I reasoned that if the monster was lured out of his lair by jealousy, it would be my chance to get inside safely through the secret passage on the third level down. It was in my and everybody's interest to know exactly what went on in there! One day, tired of waiting for an opportunity, I pressed the catch and immediately heard sounds of the most amazing music. The monster was working, with all the doors open, on his *Don Juan Triumphant*. I knew that he regarded it as his magnum opus. I was very careful not to move and stayed quietly where I was, in my dark corner. At one point, he stopped playing and began marching around his lair like someone demented shouting: 'It's got to be finished *first*, every last note of it!' I did not find his words very reassuring and when the music started up again I carefully closed the stone. But even when it was fully shut, I could still hear faint, distant strains rising from the depth of the earth just as I had heard the song of the Siren rising from the depths of the lake. I remembered what the stagehands had said when Joseph Buquet had died, though it had raised a condescending smile at the time: they'd claimed to have 'heard a sound like a death march echoing over the corpse'!

The evening Christine Daaé was abducted, I did not get to the theatre until quite late, dreading that I might be greeted by bad news. I'd spent a very worrying day. Ever since reading in that morning's paper the announcement of the forthcoming marriage of Christine Daaé and the Viscount de Chagny, I had been debating if I should not *just simply tell the police all I knew about the monster*. But on second thoughts I convinced myself that doing so would merely hasten the calamity I wanted to avoid.

When my carriage dropped me outside the Opera I stared at it for a moment as if I was amazed to see that *the place was still standing!*

But like every self-respecting Oriental I am rather fatalistic in outlook and in I went, *ready for anything!*

The disappearance of Christine Daaé during the prison act, which was such a shock to everyone, found me ready primed. I was sure that Erik had spirited her off, like the king of conjurors that he really is. And this time, I was afraid it meant the end for Christine and *perhaps for many more besides.*

I was so convinced of this that I wondered for a moment if I shouldn't warn the people who stayed in their seats to get out at once. But I was stopped by the thought that if I denounced Erik people would simply think I was mad. I also knew that if, for example, I shouted 'Fire!' to clear the auditorium, I could well cause a disaster—people asphyxiated, trampled underfoot, caught up in a wild stampede—far worse than the catastrophe I dreaded.

Even so I decided I would have to do something myself, and without further delay. The time seemed right. I could reasonably assume that Erik would not be thinking about anything except his prisoner. I had to make the most of my opportunity to get into his house via the third level and I decided it would be useful to have young de Chagny, who was so desperate, come along with me. He agreed like a shot and showed a faith in me that I found very heartening. I had sent my servant to fetch my pistols. Darius brought the case to Christine's dressing room. I gave one pistol to the Viscount and told him to be ready to use it, as I was, for Erik might be waiting for us behind the wall. We would travel down the Communards' tunnel and then drop down onto the third level through the trap in the floor.

When he saw the pistols, the Viscount had asked if we were off to fight a duel.

'Oh yes!' I said and added: 'And some duel it will be!'

But there wasn't time to explain. He's a brave young man, but he knew little or nothing about his opponent! And doubtless it was just as well!

What is a duel with the most fearsome bully compared with going up against the most brilliant of illusionists? Even I was unnerved by the thought of doing battle with a man who was visible only when he wanted to be but could see everything around him whereas you couldn't see your hand in front of your face!… a man whose fantastic knowledge of science, subtle mind, imagination and sheer skill enabled him to exploit the forces of nature and combine them in ways that confuse the eyes and ears with deadly trickery!… And where better to do this than in the bowels of the Opera House, that land of dreams and make-believe! Can you imagine it without quaking? Can you have any idea of the effect on the eyes and ears of anyone sallying forth to do battle on the home territory—the Opera, with its five lower levels and twenty-five upper levels—of a kind of diabolical Robert-Houdin with a twisted sense of humour who would joke and hate by turns and steal and kill at will!… Ask yourself this: 'How would I fight the King of Traps?' By God! Did he not come to Persia and build inside our palaces astounding swivelling walls and trapdoors which have never been bettered?… How could anyone expect to beat the King of Traps in the Kingdom of Traps?

I hoped he had not left his house by the lake where he had surely taken a doubtless still unconscious Christine Daaé. But my greatest fear was that he was already hovering somewhere around, waiting to use *his Punjab noose.*

No one is more skilled in the art of throwing a *Punjab noose*. Erik is the Prince of Stranglers just as he is the King of Illusionists. Whenever, back in the days of the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*, he'd made the Sultana laugh enough, she would order him to amuse her with exciting thrills and cruel entertainments.* He

found that the best way of doing this was with the Punjab noose. Erik had lived in India and had returned with astonishing expertise as a strangler. He would be shut inside a closed yard where a warrior would be brought to him, usually a criminal awaiting execution. His opponent was given a long pike and a broad sword. Erik was armed only with his noose and it was invariably when the warrior thought he was about to cut Erik down with one mighty stroke that we heard the swish of the noose through the air. With a snap of the wrist, Erik wrapped the thin cord around the neck of his adversary and with it dragged the man to a window where the young Sultana, attended by her women, was watching and clapping her hands. She herself learned to throw the Punjab noose and throttled several of her attendants and even a number of her women friends who had come to call.

But I would prefer to drop the awful subject of the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*. If I have brought it up, it is only because, having brought the Viscount de Chagny down to the lower levels, I needed to warn him that there was a real danger all around us that we might be strangled. Naturally, once we were in the bowels of the Opera, pistols were useless. Since Erik had made no move against us in the Communards' Tunnel, I thought it unlikely that he would let us catch even a glimpse of him. But he could easily garrotte us. There wasn't time to explain all this to the Viscount and even if there had been I'm not sure I would have spent it telling him that somewhere in the dark there was a Punjab noose just waiting to come flying in our direction. There was no point making the situation even more fraught so I merely told the Viscount to keep one hand up, at eye level, with his arm bent like a duellist who, pistol in hand, stands waiting for the command to fire. With the arm held thus, it is impossible for even the most skilful strangler to use a Punjab noose. It wraps itself round not just the neck but around the hand or arm too. It can then be easily removed and is thus neutralized.

After eluding the police Inspector, several door-boys and the firemen, and made our first acquaintance with the rat-catcher and escaped the notice of the man in the felt hat, the Viscount and I managed, without further alarums, to reach the third level and squeeze between the backcloth and part of the scenery from *The King of Lahore.* I pressed the spring and we dropped down into the house which Erik had built for himself inside the double skin of the foundations of the Opera House—*something which he had managed to do unobserved for he was one of the main contractors used by Charles Garnier, the architect of the Paris Opera, and he had gone on working, secretly, alone, when all building work was officially suspended during the war, the Siege of Paris and the Commune.*

I knew Erik too well to imagine that I could ever discover all the devices he had installed in all that time. Which was why I was very wary as I lowered myself into his lair. I knew what he had done with one palace in Mazanderan. He had turned the most innocuous building into a devil's cauldron where no one could say anything without it being heard and relayed by an echo. How many family crises, how many bloody tragedies had the monster not left in his wake with his infernal traps and devices! Not to mention the fact that in the palaces which he had 'transmogrified' people became disorientated and did not know where they were. Some of his creations were truly amazing. But the strangest, the most horrible and the most dangerous by far was the *torture chamber*. Apart from the exceptional occasion when the Sultana amused herself by tormenting some harmless citizen, it was used only for criminals under sentence of death. I still think it was the vilest of all the creations of the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*. When the victim who had ended up in the *torture chamber* could stand no more, he was allowed to 'put an end to it' with a Punjab noose which had been left for that very purpose at the foot of the iron tree. So imagine the shock I had, the moment I found myself inside the monster's lair, to realize that the room into which the Viscount and I had dropped was an exact reproduction of the torture chamber from the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*.

On the floor I found the Punjab noose I had been dreading all night. I was convinced that it had already been used on Joseph Buquet who, like me, must have come upon Erik unawares as he was opening the stone in the wall on the third level. He was curious and probably climbed into the passage before the stone swung back and closed. He had then fallen into the torture chamber and left it sometime later, feet first, after he had hanged himself. I could easily picture Erik, having to dispose of the body, dragging it back up to the third level and hooking it on the flat from *Le Roi de Lahore* as an example or to stoke *the superstitious terror which was so useful in guarding the approaches to his lair by the lake!*

But he'd had second thoughts. He went back to retrieve the Punjab noose which, being unusually made of catgut, might arouse the curiosity of an examining magistrate. That explained the disappearance of the hanged man's rope.

And now I found the noose on the floor of the torture chamber!… I am no coward, but I broke out in a cold sweat.

As I shone the small red circle from the lantern over the walls of the torture chamber, my hand shook.

The Viscount noticed and asked:

'What's the matter?'

Frantically I urged him to stay silent, for I clung to my one last hope that we'd landed in the torture chamber without the monster's knowledge!

Even so, my hoping did not mean that we were saved, for I could also imagine that the torture chamber, which was entered from the third level, might well be part of the defences of the house by the lake and designed to respond independently.

Which meant that the torture could well begin *automatically*.

Who could say what actions on our part it was waiting for before it could start?

I told my companion to keep absolutely still.

A crushing silence weighed down on us.

And the red beam from my lantern continued to wander all around the torture chamber… which I remembered… remembered it well…

22
Inside the Torture Chamber

We were standing in the middle of a small room in the shape of a hexagon. All six walls were lined with plate mirrors from floor to ceiling. To every angle was added a section of reflecting glass which turned freely on pivots… oh yes, I remembered them!… and I also remembered the wrought-iron tree in one corner with its accompanying insert, the iron tree with its iron branch… the hanging tree.

I grabbed the Viscount's arm for he was shaking with excitement and bursting to call out to Christine that help was on the way… I was afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself.

Suddenly we heard a sound to our left.

It started like a door opening and shutting in an adjoining room. It was followed by a low moan. I gripped the Viscount's arm even more tightly and then we distinctly heard a voice speaking:

'Choose you must! The *Wedding Mass* or the *Requiem for the Dead*?'

I recognized the monster's voice.

There was another groan.

Then a long silence.

I was now convinced that the monster did not know we were there. Otherwise, he would have made sure we could not hear him. He only had to cover the inevitable concealed spyhole through which aficionados of torture watch what goes on inside a chamber of horrors.

Besides, I knew the torture would have begun already if *he* had been aware of our presence.

That gave us one big advantage over Erik: we were very close and he did not know it.

It was vital that we did nothing to change that. The greatest danger was the Viscount's impulsiveness. He was itching to hurl himself at the walls to get to Christine Daaé, for we assumed that the intermittent moans we heard must be coming from her.

'The *Requiem* does not make for pleasant listening!' Erik's voice went on, 'but the *Wedding Mass* is altogether different! It is magnificent! You must make up your mind and decide which you want! I can't go on living like this any longer, creeping about under the earth, in a hole in the ground, like a mole! *Don Juan Triumphant* is finished at last and now I want to live an ordinary life, be like other people. I want a wife like other men; we'll go for walks together on Sundays. I've made a mask which lets me pass unnoticed in a crowd. No one will turn round in the street and stare. You will be the happiest of women. We shall sing together, just the two of us, and it will be bliss. You're crying! You're afraid of me! But I'm not a bad man! Love me and you'll see! *To be good and kind, all I ever needed was to be loved!* If you loved me, I would be as gentle as a lamb and you could do with me whatever you wanted!'

The groans which punctuated this litany of love grew louder and louder. I have never heard such a disturbing sound and the Viscount and I quickly realized that this keening jeremiad was the expression of Erik's despair. As for Christine, she couldn't be far away, perhaps she was there, on the other side of the wall facing us, dumb with horror, with the monster at her feet, not having the strength to cry out.

Erik's lamentation growled, resounded, surged like the plaintive threnody of the sea. Three times he broke off and with the shingle scraping in his throat he howled:

'You do not love me! You do not love me! You do not love me!'

And then, very softly:

'Why are you crying? You know I hate it when you cry!'

Then a silence would follow.

And each silence gave us fresh hope. We wondered: 'Perhaps he's gone and Christine is there, by herself, on the other side of this wall!'

All we could think of was how we might let her know we were there without giving ourselves away.

We could only get out of the torture chamber if she opened the door for us. Whether or not we could come to her rescue depended entirely on that basic proposition, for we had no idea where in the chamber the door was located.

Then the silence from the adjoining room was broken by the ringing of an electric bell.

We heard a startled reaction through the wall and Erik's voice thundered:

'Ah! Someone at the gate! Pray be so good as to come in!' he said with a menacing snigger. 'Who's this coming bothering us now? Wait, I won't be long… *just going to tell the Siren to open the door*.'

Footsteps faded away and a door closed. I had no time to think of what new horror was about to take place, I forgot that the monster had probably only left the room to commit another murder. I knew now that Christine was alone behind the wall!

The Viscount de Chagny was already calling to her.

'Christine! Christine!'

Since we had been able to hear what was being said in the adjacent room, there was no reason why she should not hear us. And yet the Viscount had to call again, several times.

Finally, a faint voice reached us: 'I must be dreaming!'

'Christine! Christine! It's me, Raoul!'

Silence.

'Answer me, Christine!… If you are alone, for God's sake, answer!'

Then Christine's voice murmured Raoul's name.

'Yes, it's really me! It's not a dream! Christine, trust me!… We've come to rescue you… but be careful!… If you hear the monster coming back, you must warn us!…'

'Raoul! Raoul!'

She made him repeat several times that she wasn't dreaming and that Raoul de Chagny had come to rescue her, with the help of a faithful companion who knew a secret way into Erik's house by the lake.

But very quickly her sudden elation gave way to the sheerest terror. She wanted Raoul to get away at once. She was afraid Erik would discover where he was hiding. If that happened he would not hesitate to kill him. She told us in a few rushed words that love had unhinged Erik's mind and that if she did not consent to be married by both mayor and priest[*]—the curé of the Madeleine—he was determined *to kill everybody and himself along with the rest.* He had given her until eleven the next evening to consider. It was her last chance. That was the moment when she would have to choose between his *Wedding Mass* and the *Requiem for the Dead*.

And then he had added something which Christine had not understood:

'Yes or no. If it's no, then everyone is dead and *buried!*'

But I understood exactly what the words meant, for they were a terrible confirmation of my worst fears.

'Can you tell us where Erik is now?' I asked.

She said he'd probably left the house.

'Could you go and find out?'

'No!… I'm tied hand and foot… I can hardly move.'

When we heard this, the Viscount and I could not contain a cry of fury. The salvation of all three of us depended on Christine being free to move about.

'But we must save her! We must go to her!'

'Where are you exactly?' Christine asked again. 'There are only two doors here in my room—the Louis-Philippe room I told you about, Raoul!… One door through which Erik enters and leaves, and another which he's never opened in my presence and warned me never to open it because, he said, it's a very dangerous door… the door to a torture chamber!'

'That's the door we're behind, Christine!'

'You're in the torture chamber?'

'Yes, but we can't find the door.'

'If I could drag myself that far!… I could knock on it and you'd know where it was.'

'Is it a door with a lock?' I asked.

'Yes, there's a lock.'

I thought: From that side it opens with a key like any other door. But from the inside it opens with a spring and a counterweight and it won't be easy to find the catch.

'Mademoiselle Christine,' I called, 'you've got to open the door for us!'

'But how?' she answered, with a sob in her voice… We heard the sounds of a body straining every sinew, clearly making every effort to free itself of the ropes which held it.

'We're not going to get out of this unless we fool him somehow,' I said. 'We've got to get hold of that key!'

'I know where it is,' answered Christine who sounded exhausted by her strenuous efforts. 'But I'm tied up tight!… The villain!…'

And we heard a sob.

'Where is the key?' I asked, and I told the Viscount to be quiet and let me do the talking because there wasn't a moment to lose.

'In the next room, he keeps it by the organ with a second small brass key which he also said I was never to touch. They are both in a small leather pouch which he calls: *his little bag of life and death*. Raoul! Raoul! You must get away!… everything here is mystery and danger!… and Erik will become completely insane!… And you, there, in the torture chamber!… Go back the way you came! There must be a good reason why that room is called by such a name!'

'Christine!' said the Viscount, 'we are going to leave this place together or we shall die together!'

'Then we're going to have to make sure that we all get out safe and sound,' I murmured, 'but we mustn't lose our heads. Now, why did he tie you up? You can't escape and he knows it!'

'I tried to kill myself last night! After he brought me here unconscious, half-chloroformed, the monster went out. Apparently, he was going, or so he said, *to see his banker!*… When he got back, he found me with blood all over my face from beating my head against the wall…'

'Oh Christine!' groaned Raoul, and a sob sprang to his throat.

'So he tied me up… I'm not allowed to die until tomorrow night, at eleven.'

This conversation through the wall was much more 'stilted' and much more tentative than it is possible for me to convey as I transcribe it here. Often we would stop in the middle of a sentence because we thought we'd heard a creak, a footstep, an unusual movement… Then she would say: 'No! No! It's not him!… he's gone outside!… I recognized the sound made by the stone in the lake wall closing behind him!…'

'Mademoiselle Christine,' I said. 'The monster tied you up and the monster will untie you!… All you've got to do is play him along!… Remember: he loves you!'

'But how', we heard her say despairingly, 'can I ever forget it?'

'Just remember that he does and smile… plead… say the rope is hurting…'

But she broke in: 'Hush!… I can hear something… it's coming from the lake wall!… It's him!… Leave now!… You must get away!…'

'We couldn't leave even if we wanted to,' I said quickly in a way that would make her take notice. 'We can't get out! We're trapped in the torture chamber!…'

'Hush!' Christine breathed again.

We all stopped talking.

Heavy footsteps, treading slowly, sounded on the other side of the wall. They stopped. Then again they made the floorboards creak.

We heard a deep sigh followed by a horrified scream from Christine and then Erik's voice.

'Please forgive me for appearing with my face uncovered! I'm in a sorry state, am I not? But it was *the man's fault!* Why did he have to come ringing my doorbell? Do *I* bother strangers? He'll never bother anybody again. It was *the Siren's fault*.'

There was another sigh, even deeper and more menacing, and it rose up out of the lowest depths of a human soul.

'Why did you cry out, Christine?'

'Because the rope is hurting me, Erik.'

'I thought it was because I'd frightened you.'

'Erik, untie me… I'm already a prisoner here.'

'You'll try to kill yourself again.'

'You gave me until eleven tomorrow night, Erik.'

More footsteps on the wooden floor.

'I'll do as you ask… after all if we're going to die together… and I want that just as much as you do… Oh, I've had enough of this life too… just a moment, don't move, I'll untie you… all you have to do is say one word—*No!*—and it will all be over *for everybody!*… But why wait until tomorrow night at eleven? Ah, I remember, because it's the proper way to do these things… I've always been a stickler for etiquette… for ceremony… so childish!… We must always think of ourselves first in this life!… and of our death… the rest is sideshows… *You're wondering why I'm soaking wet*… Ah, my sweet, I was wrong to go outside… It's not a night to be out in!… And also I think I've started to see things… The man who rang the bell and woke the Siren—if you want to know if he's still ringing it you'll have to look at the bottom of the lake—well, he reminded me of… There, turn round… better now? You're free… Oh no! Your poor wrists… did I hurt them?… that in itself deserves punishment by death… And speaking of death, *I must sing my* Requiem *for him!*'

As I heard those ominous words, I suddenly had a presentiment… I remembered what happened when I too had come calling… and unwittingly set off some electric alarm… I recalled the two arms which rose out of the ink-black water… Who was the poor devil who had wandered on to that lake shore this time?

Thinking about him, whoever he was, prevented me fully appreciating Christine's smart work. But the Viscount was muttering the magic words in my ear: 'She's free!'… But that other man? Who was he? The same as the man whose *Requiem Mass* we now heard being sung?

The singing was sublime and full of rage! The entire house by the lake rang with it… the very bowels of the earth shook with it… We had been pressing our ears against the wall of mirrors so that we could hear what Christine Daaé had been doing to save us. But now all we could hear was the sound of his mass for the

dead. Yet it was more like a mass for the damned… It reverberated deep in the ground, like a devil's roundelay!

I remember how the *Dies Irae* he sang hit us like a storm. Around us the thunder rolled and lightning flashed… Of course! I'd heard it before!… He'd made the stone jaws of the human-headed bulls sing it from the battlements of the palace of Mazanderan!… But I had never heard it sung like that, no never! He sang it as though he were the god of thunder!…

Then all at once the voice and the organ stopped so unexpectedly that the shock made both the Viscount and me recoil several steps from the wall… And the voice, suddenly changed and rough, rasped out a question, with every syllable distinct and ringingly clear:

'*What have you done with my bag?*'

23
The Torture Begins

THE voice repeated the question angrily:

'What have you done with my bag and my keys?'

Christine Daaé could not afford to show fear any more than we could to feel it.

'Was that why you asked me to untie you, so that you could take my keys?'

We heard the sound of running feet… It was Christine returning to the Louis-Philippe room as if she were seeking sanctuary by our wall.

'Why are you running away?' barked the furious voice which had followed her… 'Give me back my bag, will you?… Remember, it's *the little bag of life and death*?'

'Listen, Erik,' sighed Christine, 'since it seems to be settled that we are going to live here together, why shouldn't I have them?… Whatever is yours is mine…'

But her voice shook and we were painfully aware that there was nothing we could do. Quelling her terror was clearly draining whatever energy she had left… But it would take more than childish ruses and teeth that chattered with fear to get the better of the monster.

'There are two keys in it, that's all… But you know that… so what are you up to?'

'I merely wanted', she said, 'to look inside that room, the one I've never been in, the one you always keep locked… Just female curiosity!' she added in a tone which she intended to be light but sounded so false that it merely increased Erik's suspicions.

'I don't like inquisitive women!' he retorted, 'and besides you should be more careful. Never heard of Bluebeard?… Enough of this, give me the bag! Give it to me!… Let me have that key!… Curiosity killed the cat!'

And we heard him laugh as Christine screeched with pain. Evidently he'd just grabbed the bag from her.

It was this that made the Viscount snap. He could no longer hold back a cry of rage and frustration which I almost managed, with some difficulty, to stifle on his lips.

'What was that?' said the monster. 'Did you hear it, Christine?…'

'No!' cried the poor girl, 'I heard nothing!'

'I thought I heard a cry!'

'No!… Don't be silly, Erik!… Who do you think is going to cry out in this place?… If anyone cried out it was me, because you were hurting me!… I never heard a thing!'

'How glibly you say that!… You're shaking!… You're anxious!… You're lying!… I did hear a cry!… There's somebody in the torture chamber!… Ah, now I've got it!…'

'There's nobody there, Erik!'

'I understand!'

'Nobody!'

'Could it be… the man you want to marry?'

'I don't want to marry anyone!… as you very well know!'

Another ugly snicker.

'Not to worry, it's easy enough to check… Christine, my love, we don't have to open the door to see what's going on in the torture chamber… You want to see? You can if you like… Come on!… If there really is somebody inside an invisible spyhole will light up… just look up there, near the ceiling… All you do is pull back the black curtain and put the lights out in here… first the curtain… now the lights… Don't be afraid of the dark, you'll have your make-believe husband to keep you company!…'

Then we heard Christine's terrified voice:

'No!… I'm afraid!… I'm afraid of the dark!… I don't want to know about that room anymore!… You're frightening me, as if I were a child, with all your talk of torture chambers!… So I was curious, I admit it!… But I'm not curious anymore!… not the least curious!…'

And the thing I was most afraid of now began to happen, *automatically*… Suddenly we were bathed in dazzling light!… Everything on our side of the wall was brilliantly lit. The Viscount was not expecting it and was so taken off guard that he staggered. And that raging voice howled all around us:

'I told you! There is somebody in there!… Can you see the spyhole?… It's lit up!… Near the ceiling!… Whoever is behind the wall can't see it!… But climb up this folding ladder, that's what it's for!… You've asked me what it was doing here often enough… well, now you know… It's here so that you can look down into the torture chamber… Curiosity satisfied now?'

'Torture?… What sort of torture goes on in there?… Erik, just say you're trying to frighten me!… Tell me, if you really love me!… Really there is no torture, is there?… You made it all up!…'

'Take a look for yourself, my sweet, through the peephole!'

I couldn't say if the Viscount next to me could still hear Christine's faltering voice, for he was too busy coping with the unprecedented assault on our eyes… I of course had already seen it, all too often, through the spyhole back in the era of the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*… So I could concentrate on what was being said in the adjoining room and try and think of something we could do, some decisive step we could take.

'Go on, take a peep through the little window!… You can tell me who's there!… *and what his nose looks like!*'

We heard the ladder being put against the wall.

'Up you go!… No!… On second thoughts, I'll go myself, my sweet!'

'No!… I'll go and see!… Let me go!…'

'My sweet girl!… How sweet you are!… How so very sweet of you to spare me the trouble at my age!*… But you must tell me if he's got an attractive nose, won't you!… If people only realized how lucky they are to have a nose… a real one of their own… they'd never go anywhere near my torture chamber!…'

As he said this, from above our heads, we distinctly heard Christine say:

'There's no one there!…'

'No one?… Are you sure?'

'Quite sure… no one…'

'That's all right then!… But what's the matter, Christine?… You're not going to faint, are you?… why would you if no one's there!… pull yourself together, there's no need to get into a state seeing that there's no one there!… *But how do you like the scenery?*…'

'Oh, very much!…'

'There, that's better!… You're getting over it now, aren't you?… Good, good!… No more need to get upset!… What an amazing house, don't you think, that has actual scenery in it?…'

'Yes, it's like the Musée Grévin!… But Erik, there aren't any instruments of torture!… You gave me a terrible fright!…'

'Why, since there's no one there?…'

'Did you build that room yourself, Erik?… It's really very beautiful! Erik, you are a great artist, truly you are!…'

'I am a great artist, after my own fashion…'

'But why do you call that room a torture chamber?…'

'It's very simple. First, what did you see?'

'A forest!…'

'And what do you get in a forest?'

'Trees!…'

'And what do you usually see in trees?'

'Birds…'

'Did you see any birds?…'

'No, I didn't see any birds…'

'Well, what did you see? Think!… You saw branches! And what was one of the branches?' said that menacing voice, '*a gibbet!* That's why I call my forest a torture chamber!… Do you follow? It's a joke! It's all a joke!… I don't say things the way other people do!… I don't do anything like other people!… But I'm so tired of it!… exhausted!… weary of having a forest and a torture chamber in my house!… of living here like a Great Magician inside a box with a false bottom!… I've had enough of it all!… I want a quiet apartment, with ordinary doors and windows and a loving wife in it, just like other men!… Surely you can understand that, Christine, I shouldn't need to keep on repeating it!… A wife, like other men!… A wife I could love, I'd take her out for walks every Sunday and make her laugh on all the other days of the week! There'd never be a dull moment. I've got more than one sort of trick up my sleeve, and I don't just mean card tricks!… But if you like card tricks, I could show you some! It'll help pass the time until eleven o'clock tomorrow evening!… Christine, oh Christine!… Are you listening?… You're not saying anything!… Tell me you love me?… No, you don't love me!… No matter, you will! There was a time when you couldn't bear to look at my mask because you knew what was under it… And now you look at it and forget what it conceals and you no longer push me away!… People can get used to anything if they want to… really want to!… Plenty of young people who are not in love before they marry become besotted with each other afterwards!… Oh, what am I saying!… But you'd never have a dull moment with me!… For example, and this I swear before the God who—if you see sense—will marry us, I am the greatest ventriloquist alive!… no one can throw their voice better than me!… That makes you laugh!… Perhaps you don't believe me!… Listen!…'

I knew what the monster (who really was the world's greatest ventriloquist) was doing: he now proceeded to dazzle Christine, to divert attention away from the torture chamber!… But it was an elementary miscalculation!… She was thinking only of us!… Several times she begged him, in the sweetest voice:

'Put the light out in the little window, Erik!… Put it out!…'

For she was quite right in thinking that there was some horrible significance attached to the light which had appeared in the spyhole, for the monster had talked about it with such sinister relish… But there was one thing that must have allayed her immediate fears: when she had seen us both behind the wall, in that dazzling blaze of light, we were still standing, alive and well!… But she would have felt infinitely more reassured if the light had been extinguished…

The monster had just started his ventriloquist's act:

'There, I lift my mask a little… just a little… See my lips? Or what I have that pass for lips? They're not moving!… My mouth is closed… Or what passes for a mouth is closed tight… And yet you can hear me speak!… I'm speaking with my abdomen… It's perfectly natural… that's why they call it ventriloquism, meaning "belly-speaking"!… It's a well-known fact: listen to my voice… where do you want me to throw it? Into your right ear?… or your left ear?… or the table?… or those little ebony boxes on the mantelpiece?… Ha! You're amazed… now it's coming from the little boxes on the mantelpiece!… Do you want it to come from far away?… or from close to you? How do you want it? Loud? Sharp? Nasal?… My voice can go anywhere!… everywhere!… Listen, my sweet, it's in the small box on the right hand side of the mantelpiece, listen to what it says: "*Should I turn the scorpion?*"… and now, listen to what it says in the box on the left: "*Should I turn the grasshopper?*" And now, hey presto, it's in the little leather bag… What's it say? "*I am the little bag that holds the keys of life and death!*" And now, abracadabra, it's in La Carlotta's throat, deep inside her golden throat, La Carlotta's throat of tintinnabulating crystal, by God!… And what does it say from in there? "It's me, Mister Toad, I'm the one singing '*Which like a spell now tightly holds me…* skaark! *And a sweet, soft melody enfolds me…* skaark!'" And now it's inside a chair in the Phantom's box and it says "*The way she's singing tonight could well bring down the chandelier.*" And now!… ha ha ha ha!… now where is Erik's voice?… Listen, Christine, my sweet!… Listen!… It's on the other side of the door of the torture chamber!… And what am I saying? I'm saying "Woe betide those blessed with a nose, a real nose of their own and yet come poking it into my torture chamber!…"'

And he gave a demented laugh.

That damnable, unstoppable voice of the ventriloquist was everywhere!… It entered through the spyhole… passed through walls… it was all around us… between us… Erik was there!… He spoke to us!… We braced ourselves, were about to grapple with him… but Erik's voice, quicker and more elusive than the voice of the echo, had jumped back through to the wall again!

Soon we stopped hearing anything at all, for this is what happened:

Christine's voice: 'Erik! That's enough of you and your voice!… Please stop now!… And tell me, why is it getting so warm in here?'

'Very warm,' agreed Erik's voice, 'it's becoming oppressive!…'

Then Christine's despairing voice: 'What's happening?… The wall is getting hot!… It's too hot to touch!…'

'I'll tell you what's happening, Christine, my sweet: it's happening on account of "the forest in the next room"!…'

'What do you mean, "on account of the forest"?'

'Didn't you notice that the forest was *a jungle in the Congo*?'

And the monster's laughter grew so loud and so menacing that we could no longer hear Christine's desperate pleading!… The Viscount yelled and beat his fists against the wall like a madman… I could no longer restrain him… but it hardly mattered for every other sound was drowned by the monster's demented laughter… even the monster could not have heard anything else… And then there were brief sounds of a struggle, of a body falling on the floor and being dragged away… a door slammed… and then nothing, nothing all around us except the blistering silence of noon!… in the heart of an African jungle!…

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24
'Any old barrels!… Barrels!… Any old barrels for sale?'

I HAVE explained that the chamber in which the Viscount and I found ourselves was a regular hexagon lined from floor to ceiling with reflecting glass. Since those days, certain shows and exhibitions have featured exact replicas of such chambers. They are usually called a 'Hall of Mirrors' or a 'Palace of Illusions'. But their creation was entirely Erik's own, as I know because I was there when he built the first chamber of this type in the era of the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*. All that was needed was to place a decorative object in one corner, a column for instance, to create an instant Palace of a Thousand Columns, for the combined effect of the reflection expanded the actual chamber by creating six further hexagonal chambers each of which was multiplied ad infinitum. In those days, to keep the Sultana amused, he had dreamed up a decor which became a 'temple innumerable'. But the Sultana soon wearied of this basic optical effect, so Erik turned his invention into a torture chamber. For the architectural motif installed in one corner, he substituted a tree made of iron. Why was his tree, which was perfectly lifelike with its hand-painted leaves, made of iron? Because it needed to be strong enough to withstand the most frenzied onslaught by any 'patient' locked up in the torture chamber. We shall see, twice, how the illusion thus created could be changed instantly by bringing into play two additional motifs by means of rotating painted reflective inserts located in each corner. These revolving inserts had three distinct faces and slotted flush into the angles made by the silvered wall panels, each face having its own decorative motif which appeared as the insert revolved.

The walls of this singular chamber offered the patient no handhold or refuge. The decorative motifs were invulnerable to attack while the walls themselves were lined with reflective glass plate thick enough and tough enough to be safe from the fury of the poor devils locked up there who, in any case, were empty-handed and barefooted.

It contained no furniture. The ceiling could be brilliantly lit. An ingenious system of electrical heating, widely used since, allowed the temperature of the walls to be raised at will and thus provide the required ambience.

I have insisted on giving these exact details of an entirely rationally engineered invention which, with just a few painted branches, created the supernatural illusion of an equatorial forest scorched by a midday sun, so that no one will doubt the balance of my mind or feel entitled to say: 'The man's mad!' or 'He's lying!' or 'He must think we're all fools!'[1]

I could have told the story like this: 'When we got down to the lowest level, we found an equatorial forest scorched by a midday sun.' But I should have been met with a reaction of blank amazement. Not that I am striving here for any particular effect. My purpose in writing this account is solely to narrate exactly what happened to the Viscount de Chagny and myself in the course of a dangerous adventure which for some time occupied the full attention of the police.

I now return to the facts where I left them.

When the ceiling suddenly lit up and the forest sprouted all round us, the Viscount was more stunned than can be easily imagined. The unexpected appearance of an impenetrable forest whose innumerable branches and trunks reached out for us with never-ending menace sent him into an alarming state of shock. He rubbed his eyes as if trying to drive away a sight that belonged in a nightmare and he blinked like a man who, on waking, has difficulty rejoining the real world. For a moment, he even forgot to *listen*!

I have explained why the appearance of the forest came as no surprise to me. So I was able to listen for the both of us to what was happening in the room next door. My attention was drawn less to the 'innumerable' decor (which my mind easily dismissed) than to the reflective panels which produced it. In places the *glass was cracked!*

Tough though it was, there were scratches and even some 'starring'. It proved beyond doubt that the torture chamber in which we were trapped *had already been put to use!*

Some poor wretch whose feet were not as bare nor his hands as empty as the guilty criminals tortured by the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*, had clearly fallen into this 'fatal hall of illusions' and, driven mad by fury and frustration, had lashed out at the mirrors which, despite minor damage, had relentlessly gone on reflecting his torment. And the branch of the tree on which he had ended his sufferings had been placed in such a way that as he died, he had the supreme consolation of seeing a thousand others dangle with him at the end of their rope!

Yes! Joseph Buquet had been here!

Were we to die as he had?

I did not think so. I knew we had several hours before us and I intended to put them to better use than Joseph Buquet had known how.

Did I not have a detailed knowledge of Erik's inventions? If I was ever to use what I knew, it was now or never!

I at once dismissed all thoughts of escaping from that damnable chamber by going back the way we had come in. I would not waste time trying to find an inside catch for the pivoting stone which sealed the passage to the third level for the simple reason that it was physically impossible!… We had dropped into the torture chamber from too great a height and there was no furniture to help us climb up to the passage, nor would the branch of the iron tree or even the shoulders of one of us have been any help.

There was only one way out: through the door which opened into the Louis-Philippe salon where Erik and Christine had been. But if that exit looked like any other door on Christine's side of the wall, there was no sign of it where we were… We would therefore have to open it without even knowing where it was. It was a tall order.

When I was quite sure that we could not expect any further help from Christine Daaé and I'd heard the monster taking—or rather dragging—her out of the Louis-Philippe room *so that she would not interfere with our punishment*, I decided to start work at once, by which I meant I would begin looking for the secret mechanism which would open the door.

But first I had to calm the Viscount down. He was striding around our little clearing in the jungle as if his mind was about to snap. Gesticulating and shouting wildly, he was not making any sense. Snatches of the conversation between Christine and the monster which he'd managed to hear, despite his distraught state, had contributed in no small measure to push him to the edge. Add to that the magic jungle and the burning heat which was beginning to make his face stream with perspiration, and you will not find it hard to understand that the Viscount was beginning to get dangerously overstressed. Despite all my urging, he was not in the mood for restraint.

He walked this way and that, without reason or motive, making a dash for a non-existent gap, thinking he had found a path which would take him to the horizon and after two or three steps crashing head first into the reflection of the illusion of a forest!

As he did so, he went on shouting: 'Christine! Christine!' He waved his pistol about, calling to the monster at the top of his voice, challenging the Angel of Music to a duel to the death, and cursing the jungle that wasn't there. The torture was having a terrible effect on his unprepared mind. I tried to neutralize its impact insofar as I could by trying to make him see reason. I made him touch the mirrors, the tree, the branches painted on revolving inserts with his fingers. I explained how the laws of optics accounted for all the tricks of the light which were bombarding us. We were not vulgar ignoramuses and we were not going peacefully, like lambs to the slaughter!

'We are in a room, a small room, that's what you must keep telling yourself. We'll walk out of here when we find the door. So let's start looking for it!'

I promised that if he let me get on with it and not disturb me by shouting and running around like a lunatic, it would take me less than an hour to find the secret catch.

At this, he lay down on the floor, as people do in woods, and said that since he didn't have anything else to do, he would wait until I'd found the way out of the jungle! He also added for good measure that from where he was 'the view was very fine'. (In spite of all I'd said, the mirage was still affecting his mind.)

Ignoring the jungle, I selected one glass panel and began testing it all over, *looking for the weak spot* which had to be pushed to make the section of wall swing open according to the system of doors and traps devised by Erik. This 'weak spot' could be a small mark on the glass, no bigger than a pea, but it concealed the spring which had to be released. I looked and looked! I felt as high as I could stretch. Erik was about the same height as me and I supposed he would not have positioned the spring higher than he could reach—this was not just an assumption, it was my only hope. I resolved to proceed along these lines, without any second thoughts, to a thorough exploration of all six reflecting panels and then, if required, of the floor.

Although I felt and pressed the panels with the greatest thoroughness, I was also conscious that I had to move quickly, for the temperature continued to rise and we were literally baking in our incandescent jungle.

I had been working in this way for half an hour and had inspected three of the panels, when my concentration was broken by a muffled moan. I turned round. It was the Viscount.

'Can't breathe!' he groaned… 'All these mirrors are reflecting this infernal heat back and forth!… Are you going to find that blasted spring soon?… Don't be long or we'll roast to death!'

I wasn't unhappy to hear him talk like that. He hadn't said one word about the jungle and this made me hope that his mind could hold out for a little longer. But then he added:

'My one consolation is that the monster has given Christine until eleven tomorrow night. If we don't get out of here and save her, at least we'll die before she does! Erik's *Requiem for the Dead* can be used for all of us!'

He took a deep breath and the hot air almost made him pass out…

Since I didn't have the same desperate reasons as the Viscount de Chagny for accepting death, I muttered a few words of encouragement and then returned to my panel. But as I turned and spoke, I made the fatal mistake of moving a few steps with the result that against the dense tangle of the jungle that wasn't there I could no longer say for sure which was the panel I had been working on! I was forced to start all over again and choose one at random!… I could not hide my frustration and the Viscount too saw that I would have to begin again at the beginning. The realization was a fresh blow to him.

'We'll never get out of this jungle!' he moaned.

He began to lose hope and as his hopes faded he began to forget that he was surrounded by mirrors. He grew even more certain the jungle was real.

I went back to my searching… and groping… The pressure soon began to tell on me too… for I found nothing… nothing at all… In the adjacent room all was silence. We were completely lost in the jungle… with no way out… with no compass… no guide… nothing. And I knew exactly what would happen to us if no one came to our rescue… or if I failed to locate that spring… But try as I might, all I could see were branches… beautiful, admirable branches which rose straight in front of me or spread out elegantly above my head… But they provided no shade! That was entirely to be expected, of course, given that we were in an equatorial jungle with the sun directly overhead… a jungle in the Congo…

The Viscount and I had several times taken off our coats and put them back on again, for at times they made us too hot but at others they protected us against the glare and heat.

I was still in good heart. But the Viscount seemed to have 'cracked'. He said he'd been marching continuously through the jungle for three days and three nights, looking for Christine Daaé. From time to time, he thought he caught sight of her behind a tree trunk or gliding among the branches, and he called to her with a desperation which brought tears to my eyes. 'Christine! Christine! Why are you running away? Don't you love me?… Aren't we going to be married?… Stop, Christine, stop!… Can't you see I'm exhausted?… Have pity, Christine!… I shall die in the jungle… far away from you!…'

And then in a semi-delirious voice, he added: 'I'm so thirsty!'

And so was I… My throat was on fire!…

But though I was now squatting on the floor, I still went on searching… searching for the spring which would open the invisible door… searching even more urgently now for I knew that the jungle was becoming more dangerous with the approach of evening… Already, the shadows of night were gathering around us… it was happening fast, exactly as it does at the equator, suddenly, with virtually no twilight…

Night in the jungles of the equator is always a dangerous time, especially when the traveller, like us, has no means of making a fire to keep wild animals at bay. Briefly abandoning my task, I tried to break off branches which I intended to light with my dark lantern. But I too was brought up short by those damned mirrors. But it was a useful reminder that we were dealing only with *the image of branches*…

The day departed but the heat did not lessen. The very opposite… It was even hotter now in the blue light of the moon. I told the Viscount to be ready for action with his pistol and not to stray far from our camp. Then I went on searching.

Suddenly, we heard the roar of a lion. It was ear-splitting and very close.

The Viscount whispered: 'It's nearly on us!… Can't you see it?… there!… through the trees, in that thicket!… If it roars again I'll shoot!…'

And roar again it did, even louder than before. The Viscount fired. I don't think he hit the lion but he certainly shattered one entire panel.

I saw the result next morning, at dawn. During the night, we must have covered a great deal of ground for we now suddenly found ourselves on the edge of a desert, an immense desert of sand, shale and rock. We were not tempted to exchange forest for desert. I stretched out next to the Viscount, exhausted by the effort of searching for but not finding the secret mechanism.

I told him how surprised I was that we had not been exposed to further scares during the night. I knew from experience that usually the lion came first, then the leopard and sometimes buzzing swarms of tsetse flies. They were just stage effects, of course, and very easy to create. While we rested before setting out to cross the desert, I explained that Erik produced the lion's roar with a tabor or long narrow drum with an ass's skin stretched over one end. Across the skin was laid a length of catgut tied in the middle to a second length of catgut which runs the entire length of the drum. All Erik had to do was run a glove dusted with rosin up and down the catgut and, depending how he 'played' this 'string', he could reproduce exact imitations of the roar of a lion or leopard or even the buzzing of a swarm of tsetse flies.

The thought that Erik might be in the adjacent room with his bag of tricks decided me to try to parley with him. Obviously, it was too late to hope that we could take him by surprise. By now, he must know who his prisoners in the torture chamber were. I called him: 'Erik! Erik!'… I shouted as loudly as I could across the desert but there was no answer… All around us was the silent vastness of that stony desert… What would happen to us in the middle of such appalling emptiness?…

We were now literally in danger of dying of heat, hunger and thirst… particularly of thirst… Eventually I was aware that the Viscount was leaning on one elbow and pointing to a spot on the horizon… He had seen an oasis!

Yes, there in the distance, the desert gave way to an oasis… an oasis with water… water as clear and still as glass… water in which the iron tree was reflected!… Ah yes!… this was the painted picture of the *mirage*… I recognized it at once… the last and cruellest illusion of all three!… no one had ever failed to succumb to it… no one… I strove to keep a cool head… *so that I would not hope for water*… because I knew that if I hoped for water, for the water which reflected the iron tree, and if having hoped for water, I was stopped by the glass of the mirror, there was only one thing left to do: hang myself on the iron tree!…

So I shouted a warning to the Viscount: 'It's a mirage!… only a mirage!… don't believe that's real water!… it's just another trick of the light!…' But he told me to go to blazes, as they say, and take all my talk of false mirrors, secret springs, revolving doors and my hall of illusions with me!… He was furious and said I must be mad or blind if I thought that the water we could see flowing through all those countless, handsome trees was not real!… The desert was real too!… And so was the jungle!… It was no use trying to pull the wool over his eyes!… he'd travelled the world… and wherever he'd been…

He dragged himself across the floor crying:

'Water! Water!'

His mouth was open as if he were already drinking…

And I too had my mouth open as if I were drinking…

For not only could we see the water, we could *hear it!*… We heard it splashing… lapping… Do you truly understand the word *lapping*?… It's a word that *you hear with your tongue!*… The tongue pokes out of the mouth so that it can *hear* it better!

And then came the most unbearable torture of all: we heard rain but it did not rain! This was a truly diabolical invention… Of course, I knew how Erik made that sound too! He filled a long, narrow box with small stones. The space inside the box was herringboned at intervals by vanes made of wood and metal. As the stones dropped, they hit the vanes, cascaded from one to the next, and made a pattering sound indistinguishable from the pelting rain of a storm!

We made a sorry spectacle, the Viscount and I, with our tongues out, dragging ourselves towards the lapping pool… *Our eyes and ears were full of water but our tongues stayed as dry as boards!*

When he reached the mirror, the Viscount began licking it… and I too licked the glass!…

It was burning hot!…

With cries of despair we rolled around on the floor. The Viscount put the barrel of the remaining loaded pistol to his temple while I stared at the Punjab noose at my feet.

The decor changed for a third time and I knew why the iron tree was suddenly back!…

The iron tree was waiting for me!…

But as I stared at the Punjab noose I saw something which gave me such a violent jolt that the Viscount who was already muttering 'Adieu, Christine!' was stopped in his suicidal tracks.

I grabbed his arm and took the pistol from him… then I crawled on all fours towards what I had seen… In a groove in the floor was a nail with a black head. I knew immediately what it was…

At last! I'd found the secret catch!… the catch which would release the spring!… which would open the door!… which would set us free and bring us face to face with Erik!…

I reached for the nail… and turned to the Viscount with a smile on my face!… the nail with the black head gave as I pressed it!…

And then what we saw was not an opening which appeared in the wall but a trapdoor which swung down in the floor.

Cool air flowed up from the blackness below. We leaned over that hole full of shadows as hungrily as if it had been a pool of clear spring water. Chins dipped into its cool darkness, we drank it in.

We leaned further and further over the black square. What was down that hole… what was in that cellar which the trap in the floor had so mysteriously opened for us?

Perhaps there was water down there!

Water to drink!

I reached one arm into the darkness and found a stone slab, then another… a flight of steps… a dark flight of steps that led down to a cellar.

The Viscount was all for jumping straight into the hole… Even if we didn't find water down there at least we would escape the burning glare of Erik's hellish mirrors.

But I stopped the Viscount. I feared that maybe the monster had set one more snare for us. I relit my lantern and went first.

The steps spiralled down into complete darkness. But oh the relief to feel the coolness of the darkness and the steps!

It seemed likely that the coolness came less from the ventilation system which Erik had needed to install than from the ground which, given the level we had now reached, had to be saturated with water… Besides, the lake could not be very far away!…

We soon reached the foot of the steps… Our eyes were beginning to adapt to the dark and started to make out shapes in the gloom… round shapes… on which I shone the beam of my lantern…

Barrels!

We were in Erik's own cellar!

He must keep his wine here and maybe his drinking water…

I knew that he had a taste for fine wines…

We would not be short of something to drink!

The Viscount patted the round shapes and muttered repeatedly:

'Barrels! Barrels! Such a lot of barrels!'

A good number of them were stacked symmetrically in two rows between which we advanced…

They were not so much barrels as kegs or casks. I assumed that Erik had deliberately chosen to have them that size to make them easier to transport to the house by the lake.

We examined them in turn, hoping that one of them was fitted with a spigot which would tell us if it had been broached at some point.

But all the casks were hermetically sealed.

We raised one a little to check if it was full. Then we crouched down and with the blade of a small knife I had on me, I set about trying to knock the bung out.

As I began, I seemed to hear a very distant, monotonous chanting sound which I seemed to recognize, for I had heard it often enough in the streets of Paris.

'*Any old barrels!… Barrels!… Any old barrels for sale?*'

My hand froze on the bung… The Viscount had heard it too.

'That's funny,' he said. 'It's as if the cask is singing!'

Then the chanting started up again, only further away.

'*Any old barrels!… Barrels!… Any old barrels for sale?*'

'I could swear', said the Viscount, 'that the sound is being swallowed by the cask!…'

We stood up and looked behind it.

'It *is* inside!' he said. 'The sound is inside the cask!'

But we could hear nothing now… and all we could do was to put the whole thing down to the beaten, weakened state of our senses…

We returned to the bung. The Viscount held both hands under it and with one last effort I forced it out.

'What's this stuff,' he cried. 'It's not water!'

He held both his hands close to my lantern… I bent down to look… and immediately snatched the lantern back and tossed it away. As it fell, it broke and went out… It would be no further use to us…

What I'd just seen in the Viscount's hands was… gunpowder!

25
Scorpion or Grasshopper? Which is it to be?

And so, by descending to the lowest vaults of the Opera, I had also reached the lowest point of my darkest fears! Erik had not misled me with his vague threats against all those *members of the human race!* Rejected by humanity, he had fled human company and built himself an underground sanctuary. He was prepared to blow up himself and everything else in one vast cataclysm if those who lived above the ground ever tracked him down to the lair in which he had found a safe haven for his monstrous ugliness.

The discovery we had just made plunged us into a state of total shock which blotted out our own past troubles and present sufferings… Only moments before we had been on the verge of suicide; now our unique situation could not have filled us with greater horror. We understood what the monster had implied and intended when he had given Christine Daaé that odious choice: '*Yes or no. If it's no, then everyone is dead and buried!*' He meant: buried under the rubble of Paris's great Opera House!… Could a viler crime be imagined by anyone wishing to quit this life in a more horrible apotheosis? The looming disaster which the foulest monster who ever walked the earth had planned as a way of defending his hiding place, would be his revenge for unrequited love! 'Tomorrow night, at eleven': the final call!… His timing was impeccable!… The theatre would be full of people!… crowds… all of them members of the human race!… upstairs!… on the upper, light-filled levels of the house of music!… Could anyone wish for a finer setting for those who were about to die!… Erik would meet his end escorted by beautiful women whose beautiful shoulders would shine with the most beautiful gems… Tomorrow night, at eleven!… If Christine Daaé said No! we would all be blown to smithereens in the middle of the performance… Tomorrow night, at eleven! But she had no alternative but to say: No! Surely she would rather marry Death than that walking corpse? Surely she could not possibly know that her refusal would mean an inferno of death and destruction for *many of the human race*?… Tomorrow night, at eleven!…

Repeating 'tomorrow night, at eleven', we felt our way, trying to get as far away from the powder kegs as we could and find the stone steps in the dark, for up there, above us, the light coming through the trapdoor to the chamber of mirrors had gone out.

Eventually, I located the lowest step… and then suddenly, as I put my foot on it, I jerked up straight. A terrible thought had suddenly flashed through my mind: '*What time is it now?*'

The time!… what time was it?… for 'tomorrow tonight at eleven' was perhaps today, maybe any minute now!… How could we find out what time it was?… It felt as if we'd been trapped inside this hell for days and days… years… ever since the beginning of the world… Everything might explode at any moment!… What was that noise?… A kind of *crack!*… Did you hear it, Viscount?… There… in that corner!… Ye gods!… sounds like noise made by a machine!… there it is again!… if only we had a light!… perhaps it's part of the mechanism that's going to blow us all to pieces!… I told you: a *crack!*… Are you deaf?…

Then both of us begin shouting like madmen… spurred on by fear… we trip, we scramble up the steps… Perhaps the trapdoor at the top is closed! Perhaps it's dark because the trapdoor is closed… must get out of the dark!… even if it means going back to the deadly glare of the chamber of mirrors?…

We reach the top of the steps… no, the trapdoor isn't shut, but it's as dark in the chamber of mirrors as it was in the cellar!… Now we're both out of the cellar… we crawl around the floor of the torture chamber… the floor is all that separates us from the powder magazine below… what's the time?… we shout, we call!… As his strength returns, the Viscount cries out: 'Christine! Christine!'… And I shout: 'Erik! Erik!'… I remind him that I once saved his life!… But neither of us is answered!… we are left, on the edge of madness, with only an absence of hope… what's the time now?… 'Tomorrow night, at eleven!'… We try to work it out… we try to estimate how long we've been here… but we're not thinking straight… Oh for the briefest glimpse of the dial, at the hands of a watch!… Mine stopped long ago!… But the Viscount's is still ticking!… He says he wound it up as he got dressed before coming to the Opera… From this we try to draw conclusions which might allow us to hope that we hadn't yet reached the fatal moment…

The faintest sound rising through the trapdoor which I vainly try to close sends us into a panic… What's the time now?… Neither of us has a match… But we must know!… The Viscount thinks he can break the glass of his watch and feel the hands… There is a silence while he feels the pointers with his fingers… using the winder as his point of reference… Judging by the angle between the hands, he reckons it could be, perhaps, exactly eleven o'clock…

But maybe it's not *the* eleven o'clock that's turning our stomachs to water… if it isn't then maybe Erik's deadline has come and gone!… and it might be ten minutes past… and we have another twelve hours ahead of us!

Then suddenly I cry: 'Hush!'

I thought I heard footsteps in the adjoining room.

And so I did! Then came the sound of a door opening and closing… and of footsteps hurrying. A knock on the wall followed by the voice of Christine Daaé:

'Raoul! Raoul!'

We all began shouting at once on either side of the wall. Christine was sobbing, for she had not known if she would find the Viscount alive or dead!… She said the monster had fallen into a towering rage… He had done nothing but rave while he waited for her to say 'Yes!' but she wouldn't… She promised she would, but only on condition that he took her to the torture chamber!… But this he had obstinately refused to do and instead issued wild threats against every *member of the human race*… In the end, after hours of this hell, he had gone out… leaving her alone to reflect for the very last time…

'Hours and hours!'

'What time is it now, Christine?… What's the time?'

'Nearly eleven!… exactly five to.'

'Morning or evening?'

'It's the eleven o'clock which will decide between life and death… He told me so again as he was leaving,' said Christine in a tight voice. 'He's terrifying!… He's raving, he's torn his mask off and his yellow eyes flash fire! And he keeps laughing!… He was laughing like a drunken fiend when he hissed: "Five minutes! I shall leave you alone, out of respect for your well-known shyness!… I don't want you blushing, like some simpering virgin, when you finally say 'Yes!'… Damn it all! I am delicacy itself!" I told you he was like a drunken demon!

'Then he reached into *his bag of life and death* and said:

'"Here! This little brass key opens the two ebony boxes on the mantelpiece of the Louis-Philippe room… In one of them you will find a scorpion and in the other a grasshopper, both exquisitely crafted in Japanese bronze and very lifelike. They will say yes and no for you! All you do is give the scorpion one half turn, no more… so that when I come back here to this Louis-Philippe room, our prenuptial chamber, I shall know you have said *Yes!* But if you turn the grasshopper, it will mean *No!* and when I come back *I shall know*, and my Louis-Philippe room shall then be our chamber of death!…", and he shrieked with drunken, demonic laughter. I kept pleading with him on my knees to give me the key to the torture chamber, promising to be his wife for ever and ever if only he'd grant me that one wish… But he said we'd not be needing the key now and that he was going to throw it into the lake!… Then, still laughing crazily, he went out saying he would give me five minutes alone, for he was a gentleman and knew how a gentleman should treat a lady!… And he shouted as he left, he said: "Take care with the grasshopper!… Grasshoppers don't just turn, they go off!… suddenly!…up into the air!… sky high!"'

I have tried to convey Christine's jerky, feverish speech by means of truncated phrases, disjointed words and exclamation marks!… For, over the last twenty-four hours, she too must have plumbed the depths of human suffering… and perhaps had suffered more than we had!… She constantly interrupted both herself and us to ask: 'Raoul! Are you all right?…' She felt the walls, which were now cold, and asked why they had been so hot!… In this way the five minutes ticked by while the scorpion and the grasshopper ran amuck in my brain!

But I was still lucid enough to realize that if the grasshopper were turned, it would 'go off' all right… and so would *a large number of the human race* with it! Obviously the grasshopper would switch on an electric circuit which would detonate the entire gunpowder magazine!… The Viscount who, now that he'd heard Christine's voice, seemed to be his old bold self once more, quickly explained what danger we were in, we and the entire Opera House… He told her *she had to turn the scorpion*, and there was not a moment to lose…

The scorpion, which would signal the *yes* Erik longed to see, must control some arrangement which would prevent the disaster happening… possibly.

'Go quickly, Christine!… I love you!' said Raoul.

There was a silence. I called:

'Wait, Christine! Where are you?'

'I've reached the scorpion!'

'Don't touch it!'

I had been struck by the thought, for I knew Erik all too well, that he might have tricked her once more. Perhaps it was the scorpion which would set off the charge. Why wasn't he there? The five minutes had been up for some time… and he hadn't come back… He had taken cover!… He was waiting for the bomb to go off!… Yes, that's exactly what he was waiting for!… He could not seriously be expecting Christine to consent freely to be his wife!… Why hadn't he come back?…

'Don't touch the scorpion!' I said again.

'It's him!' cried Christine. 'I can hear him coming!… He's here!…'

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And there he was! We heard his footsteps approaching the Louis-Philippe room… now he was with Christine… all without a word being pronounced.

Then I spoke:

'Erik! It's me! Do you recognize me?'

He answered at once in an extraordinarily calm voice:

'*So you didn't die in there?*… Never mind, just try and keep quiet.'

I tried to say something but he interrupted in such a glacial voice that I froze behind my wall:

'Another word from you, Daroga, and I blow everything to blazes!'

And almost without pausing, he went on:

'But that honour belongs to the young lady!… She hasn't touched the scorpion (how coolly he spoke!), and she hasn't touched the grasshopper (and with such frightening composure!), but it's not too late to do the thing properly. There, I've opened the box without the key, for I am the king of traps… I can open and close whatever I like whenever I like… I can open little ebony boxes… Look inside them, Mademoiselle, look into my little ebony boxes… such pretty little creatures… so lifelike… they look so harmless!… But you can't go by appearances!… (All this was said in an unemphatic monotone.) If you turn the grasshopper, Mademoiselle, we shall all be blown sky high… There's enough explosive under our feet to blow up an entire *quartier* of Paris!… But if you turn the scorpion, the powder magazine will be flooded!… So on the occasion of our marriage, Christine, you are going to offer a great gift to several hundred Parisians who even as we speak are wildly applauding a miserable masterpiece by poor Meyerbeer… the gift of life… because you, Christine, with those pretty hands of yours (how weary the voice now sounded!) are about to turn the scorpion!… Then, joyfully and without impediment, we shall be married!…'

There was a silence and then he went on:

'Christine, if in the next two minutes by my watch, which keeps excellent time, you have not turned the scorpion, I shall turn the grasshopper. And remember: grasshoppers jump *explosively!*…'

The silence which followed was more menacing than all previous silences put together. I knew of old that when Erik's voice went quiet, calm and very weary, it was because he'd come to the end of the road and was capable of perpetrating the most colossal outrage or committing acts of the most fanatical devotion. I knew too that one word of opposition could unleash a storm! The Viscount realized that all he could do now was to get down on his knees and pray… For my part, the blood was coursing so fast through my veins that I had to put my hand on my heart lest it burst… For we could both imagine what must be going on in Christine's mind in those last seconds… we could understand why she hesitated to turn the scorpion… for she must wonder if it was the scorpion which would blow us all to kingdom come… and Erik really had decided that we should all die with him!…

Then we heard Erik's voice. It was now sweet and gentle, almost angelic:

'The two minutes are up… Adieu, Christine!… Now grasshopper, jump to it!… Let the fireworks begin!…'

'Erik!' cried Christine, who must have stayed the monster's hand, 'swear to me, swear on your satanic love, that the scorpion is the one to turn…'

'Yes, if you want fireworks for our wedding…'

'I knew it! We're all going to be blown up!'

'Fireworks for our wedding, foolish girl!… The scorpion will open the ball!… But enough of this… Since you refuse to turn the scorpion, I'll take the grasshopper!…'

'Erik!'

'Enough, I said!'

I added my voice to Christine's. The Viscount, still kneeling, continued to pray.

'There, Erik!… I've turned the scorpion!!…'

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For one second I seemed to live a lifetime.

I waited… waited to be reduced to atoms by the noise and devastation…

And then we heard a *crack!* under our feet… it came from the opening to the cellar… maybe it was the beginning… the start of the apotheosis of horror… for in the shadows, from the open trap, through the pitch blackness, rose an alarming hiss, as if a fuse had been lit…

At first it was low… then it swelled… until it was deafening…

But listen!… listen!… and hold both your hands over your heart which felt as if about to explode along with *many of the human race!*…

But it wasn't the crackle of flames!…

Wasn't it more like the hiss of water?…

'Quick!… we must get to the trap!'

'Listen!…'

Yes, definitely more like a gurgle!…

We scurry to the trap!…

Oh, it's so cool!… Cool!… Cool!… Our thirst which had been driven out by fear now came back with a vengeance…

It *is* water!… and it's rising… rising in the cellar below, over the barrels, the barrels full of gunpowder (*any old barrels!… barrels!… any old barrels for sale?*)… down we go in pursuit of that water, throats on fire… the water is up to our chins, it's at our lips…

We drink… standing in the cellar we drink…

Then in the utter darkness we climb the steps one by one, climb back up the steps we'd gone down by, rising with the water as it rises with us…

So much gunpowder, and all wet, soaked, spoiled!… Such a wonderful waste!… No danger of running short of water in the house by the lake!… If this goes on, the entire lake will end up in the cellar!…

Who knows when it will stop… Now we've come back up from the cellar and it's still rising!… It has followed us into the torture chamber too and is spreading across the floor!… If this goes on, the whole house will soon be flooded… The floor of the chamber of mirrors has turned into a small lake and we paddle in it. That's more than enough water!… Erik has got to turn the tap off:

'Erik! Erik! The gunpowder is sodden! Turn the tap off! Turn the scorpion!'

But Erik did not answer. All we could hear was the sound of the rising water which was now halfway up our legs!…

'Christine! Christine!' shouted the Viscount, 'the water's rising! It's over our knees!'

But Christine did not answer either… all we could hear was the gurgle of water rising relentlessly.

Only the noise of rushing water! There was no sound from the next room… There was no one there! No one to turn off the tap! No one to turn the scorpion! We were alone, in the dark, left to the embrace of a creeping, icy tide.

'Erik! Erik!'

'Christine! Christine!'

By now we were out of our depth, turning in a circle, propelled by an irresistible current, for the water was whirling with us and smashing us against the mirrors from which we bounced back… barely keeping our heads above water we screamed…

Were we going to die like this?… were we going to drown in a torture chamber?… I'd never seen it happen back in the days of the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan*… Erik had never shown me such a thing through the spyhole!…

'Erik! I saved your life! You can't have forgotten!… You were sentenced to death!… You were going to die!… I let you live!… Erik!…'

We were being spun round and round like pieces of flotsam!…

And then by chance my flailing hands grabbed the trunk of the iron tree!… I shouted to the Viscount and next thing the two of us were clinging to the branch of the iron tree…

But the water went on rising!

'Think! Try to remember! How much space is there between the branch and the domed ceiling of the torture chamber?… Come on, think!… But maybe the water will stop rising… sooner or later it must find its own level… Yes! I think it's stopping!… No, I was wrong!… Swim for it! Swim for your life!…'

As we swam, we got in each other's way, we gasped for breath, we struggled in the black water!… we could hardly breathe the black air above the black water!… air which escaped… which we could hear escaping through some unseen ventilation shaft above our heads!…

'Turn! Keep swimming round and round until we are taken up to that air-hole… we'll be able to breathe there!…'

But my strength began to fail, I tried to cling to the walls! But the smooth glass slipped under my searching hands!… Round and round… spinning!… sinking!… One last effort!… One last cry for help!…

'Erik!… Christine!'

Sounds of water bubbling, fizzing in our ears!… gurgling, foaming… under the black water our ears rang, boiled with it!… And before losing consciousness, I seemed still to hear a voice calling above the swish and boil of water: *any old barrels!… barrels!… any old barrels for sale?*

CHAPTER 26
The End of the Phantom's Love Story

At this point, the Persian's *written* account breaks off abruptly.

Despite their grim predicament which seemed to spell certain death for both of them, the Viscount de Chagny and his companion were saved by Christine Daaé with an act of supreme devotion. The rest of the story I had from the lips of the Daroga himself.

When I went to see him, he was still living in his small apartment in the Rue de Rivoli, opposite the Tuileries. He was not a well man and it took all my persuasive powers as a reporter-cum-chronicler committed to uncovering truth to induce him to relive those incredible moments with me. His old and faithful retainer, Darius, was still in his service and showed me the way. The Daroga received me by a window overlooking the gardens of the Tuileries. He was sitting in a large armchair and, as he straightened up, revealed a physique which must at one time have been very handsome. His eyes were still magnetic but his gaunt face was lined and drawn. His head was completely shaved and on it he ordinarily wore an astrakhan fez. He had on an enormous, plain greatcoat with long sleeves inside which he was in the habit of twiddling his thumbs. But his mind was as clear as a bell.

He could not remember his old ordeal without becoming agitated and it was in bits and pieces that I got him to relate the amazing conclusion to this strange story. At times, it took a lot of coaxing to get him to answer my questions at all. At others, stirred by his memories, he would volunteer information without any prompting from me, and paint a startlingly vivid picture of the fearsome Erik and the terrifying hours he and the Viscount de Chagny had spent in the house by the lake. He still shook visibly when he described the moment when he woke up in the oppressive semi-darkness of the Louis-Philippe salon, after their trial by water.

What follows is his account of how their hair-raising adventure ended and thus completes the written narrative which he was kind enough to entrust to me.

When he opened his eyes, the Daroga realized he was lying on a bed… Raoul de Chagny was stretched out on a couch next to a mirror-fronted wardrobe. An angel and a demon were watching over them…

After all the mirages and illusions they had faced in the torture chamber, the orderly detail of that small, neat, civilized salon seemed like yet another trick designed to disorientate any mortal rash enough to venture into that place of living nightmares. The carved wooden bed, the gleaming mahogany chairs, the chest of drawers and the brasses, the antimacassars carefully arranged over the backs of chairs, the clock on the mantelpiece flanked by the two seemingly harmless ebony boxes, and not least the whatnot with its shelves full of pretty shells, red pincushions, little mother-of-pearl boats and a huge ostrich egg… all softly lit by a shaded lamp on a small round table… the whole room, furnished with such hideously prim respectability, was quiet and tidy. But to find it there, *in the lower depths of the Opera House*, was far more disturbing than all the fantastic things they had experienced.

And in that neat, prissy setting, the figure of a masked man seemed all the more unnerving. The man leaned forward and whispered in the Daroga's ear:

'Feeling better, Daroga?… You are wondering about the furniture? My wretched mother's: it's all I have left of her.'

Other things were said which the Persian could not remember. But for some reason which he found strange, he recalled very clearly that only Erik spoke in that salon which belonged more to the age of Louis-Philippe* than the present. Christine was there but she did not say anything. She moved about noiselessly, like a Sister of Charity who had taken a vow of silence… She brought a cup of cordial… a hot infusion. The man in the mask took it from her and held it out to the Persian.

Meanwhile, the Viscount slept on.

Erik poured a little rum into the cup and, gesturing towards the sleeping Raoul, said:

'The boy there regained consciousness, Daroga, long before we knew *if you'd live to see another day*. He has come to no harm… He's sleeping… We mustn't wake him…'

Erik left the room for a moment. Raising himself on one elbow, the Persian looked all around him… At one side of the fireplace, he saw the white figure of Christine Daaé. He spoke to her… called her… but he was still very weak and fell back on his pillow… Christine came over and felt his brow with her hand, then turned and left him… The Persian recalled that as she moved away she did not even glance at Raoul who, it's true, was sleeping peacefully… and went and sat back down in her armchair by the fireplace, exactly like that Sister of Charity who had taken a vow of silence.

Erik returned carrying several small phials which he arranged on the mantelpiece. He then sat by the Persian's bedside, felt his pulse and in an even lower whisper, so that he would not wake the Viscount, he said:

'You are both quite safe now. Soon I shall take you back up to the surface—a gesture *to please my wife*.'

Without any further explanation, he stood up and went out again.

The Persian stared at Christine's serene face in the lamplight. She was reading a small volume with the gilt edges which you associate with religious books. Editions of the *Imitation of Christ** often come in such a livery. He could still hear the natural, easy tone of voice with which Erik had said '*to please my wife*'.

The Daroga called Christine's name again, softly, but she seemed deep in her book, for she did not hear…

Erik returned and gave the Daroga a potion to drink but not before telling him he mustn't speak to 'his wife' again or to any other person *because doing so might prove very dangerous for everyone's health*.

Thereafter, the Persian had confused memories of Erik's black shadow and the white figure of Christine as they came and went silently in the room and sometimes bent over the Viscount's sleeping form. The Persian was still very weak and the slightest sound—like the wardrobe door which creaked when opened—made his head ache… until he fell into a deep sleep, like Raoul.

This time, when he woke up he was in his own bed, being cared for by Darius who informed him that he had been found the previous night outside the door of his apartment where he had been deposited by someone who had rung the bell before absconding.

As soon as the Daroga had regained his strength and his senses, he wrote to Count Philippe asking for news of his brother.

He was told that Raoul was still missing and that the Count was dead. His body had been found on the bank of the lake under the Opera, on the Rue Scribe side. The Persian recalled the *Requiem Mass* he had heard when he was in the chamber of mirrors: he was sure the Count had been murdered and was in no doubt about the identity of the murderer! Knowing Erik, he had no difficulty reconstructing the crime. Convinced that his brother had eloped with Christine Daaé, Philippe had set off in hot pursuit along the Brussels road. He knew their route which had been meticulously planned. But failing to catch up with the pair, he had returned to the Opera. He recalled the strange tales Raoul had told about his superhuman rival. He learned that Raoul had hunted high and low for a way into the underground levels of the theatre and, finally, that he had disappeared, leaving his hat in the diva's dressing room next to an empty pistol case. Firmly believing now that his brother was quite mad, the Count had gone after him into that infernal, subterranean labyrinth. For the Persian, this was enough to explain the discovery of the Count's body on the banks of the lake which was so well guarded by the song of the Siren, Erik's Siren, the gatekeeper of the Lake of the Dead.

The Persian hesitated no longer. Appalled by this latest outrage and unable to stand not knowing what had finally happened to the Viscount and Christine Daaé, he decided to tell the police everything he knew.

An examining magistrate named Faure was now in charge of the case and it was on his door that the Persian knocked. It is not difficult to imagine what sort of reception so sceptical, dull, superficial (I speak as I find) and utterly impervious a mind gave to the kind of information the Persian brought him.

He was treated as if he was deranged.

Despairing of ever getting a fair hearing, the Persian then wrote letters. If the courts weren't interested in his story, perhaps the press would be. One evening, just as he was writing the last few lines of the narrative which in earlier chapters I reprinted word for word, his man Darius announced a visitor who would not give his name, kept his face well hidden and declared bluntly that he would not leave until he had seen the Daroga.

The Persian was instantly convinced that he knew the identity of his mysterious visitor and told Darius to show the man up at once.

The Daroga was right.

It was Erik! The Phantom of the Opera!

He looked very weak and hung on to the walls as if he were afraid of falling… He removed his hat, exposing a forehead which was like yellow wax. The rest of his face was covered by a mask.

The Persian stood, drew himself up and said:

'You murdered Count Philippe! What have you done with his brother and Christine Daaé?'

On hearing this opening salvo, Erik staggered, said nothing for a moment and then dragged himself to an armchair onto which he collapsed with a deep sigh. And there, in brief snatches and disjointed words between laboured breaths, he began to speak.

'Daroga, do not talk to me of Count Philippe… He was already… dead… by the time I left my house… dead I tell you… before the Siren sang… an accident… a terrible… regrettably sad… accident… He was… clumsy… he fell into the lake… simply… naturally.'

'Liar!' cried the Persian.

Erik bowed his head.

'I didn't come here… to talk about Count Philippe… but to tell you… I'm going to die…'

'Where are Raoul de Chagny and Christine Daaé?'

'I'm dying…'

'Raoul de Chagny and Christine Daaé?'

'… of love, Daroga… I am dying of love… there it is… I loved her so much!… I still do, Daroga… loved her so much that it's killing me, I tell you… If you knew how beautiful she was when she let me kiss her… willingly… she swore it on her hopes of salvation… It was the first time, Daroga, my very first time, you hear?… I never kissed a woman before… She was alive, so alive and I kissed her… and she was as beautiful as if she'd been dead!…'

The Persian was on his feet and, overcoming his qualms, dared touch Erik: he shook his arm.

'Are you going to tell me if she's alive or dead?'

'Why are you shaking me like that?' said Erik, his voice thick and slow. 'I told you… I'm the one who is going to die… Yes, I kissed her, and she was so alive.'

'But now she's dead?'

'I tell you… I kissed her on the forehead… she did not shrink from my nearness!… She is so pure!… Is she dead?… I don't think so, though it's out of my hands now… No! She's not dead! And if I hear that anyone has harmed a hair of her head…! She is brave and good!… Did you know, she saved your neck, Daroga, at a time when I wouldn't have given a snap of my fingers for your damned Persian hide! No one was thinking about you. What were you doing there with that young oaf anyway? You were both going to die! But by God, she begged me to let her young man live! I told her that she'd turned the scorpion and that meant that she'd agreed to marry me of her own free will. I said you can only be engaged to one person at a time, which was no more than the truth. But you, Daroga, had ceased to exist, I repeat: you were nothing, and you were doomed to die with the other intruder.

'But listen well, Daroga, you were both yelling like men possessed because the water kept rising. Christine came to me, opened those beautiful blue eyes, and swore, on her hopes of salvation, that she would consent to be my *living* wife! Until that moment, I had always seen deep in her eyes that she would be my *dead* wife! This was the first time I saw her as my wife while she still lived, *my living wife!*… She meant it, she'd sworn on her hopes of eternal salvation!… She wouldn't try to kill herself… the bargain was struck… Within minutes, all the water had been returned to the lake and I was pumping you out, Daroga, though I really thought you wouldn't make it!… But you did!… And I'd agreed terms! I was to take you back to your apartment on the surface. When I'd got shot of you out of the Louis-Philippe salon, I went back there alone.'

'What did you do with the Viscount de Chagny?' broke in the Persian.

'You must understand, Daroga… I had no intention of taking him up to the surface straight away… He was my hostage… But I couldn't keep him in the house by the lake either, because of Christine. So I locked him up safe and snug, chained him up—a whiff of Mazanderan opium had left him limp as a rag—in the old Communards' dungeon which is in the furthest, most deserted part of the Opera's cellars, deeper down even than the fifth level. No one ever goes there and no one would hear any cries for help. Then I calmly rejoined Christine. She was waiting for me.'

At this point in his narrative, the Phantom apparently stood up so solemnly that the Persian, who had sat down in his armchair, felt obliged to do likewise, as though obeying the same impulse and with the strong sense that he could not remain seated at such a solemn juncture. The Persian added that, despite his shaven head, he took off his astrakhan fez.

'She was there, waiting for me!' went on Erik who began to shake like a leaf, overcome by his memories, 'waiting for me, straight-backed, alive, like *a real living bride*, having staked her hopes of salvation… When I walked towards her, shyer than a little boy, she did not turn away… no… she stayed where she was… she waited… I even think, Daroga, that she… just a little, but just like a living bride… that she even held her forehead out to me to kiss… and… I kissed her!… I did that!… and she did not die of disgust!… and then, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, she stayed at my side after I'd kissed her… just like that… on her forehead… Oh how wonderful it is, Daroga, to kiss another person!… You cannot imagine it… but I can… My own mother, my poor, wretched mother, never let me kiss her… she would turn away… and make me put my mask on!… Nor did any other woman!… Never ever!… Never once!… You do understand, don't you?… such happiness!… I wept!… I went down on my knees, tears streaming down my face… I cried and I kissed her pretty feet!… Ah! You are weeping, Daroga… she wept too… my angel wept!!…'*

As Erik had told his tale, he had sobbed aloud. The Persian had not been able to hold back his own tears either as he listened to the man in the mask who, shoulders heaving and hand on his heart, had almost choked, torn between pain and joy.

'Oh, Daroga, I felt her tears fall on to my forehead… hot tears… sweet tears… her hot tears ran down inside my mask!… they ran into my eyes and mingled with mine!… they trickled onto my lips!… Her tears, on me!… Listen, Daroga, to what I did… I tore off my mask so that I wouldn't waste a single one of her tears… and still she did not turn away!… and she did not die! She stayed alive, to weep… and she wept her tears on me… with me… we wept together!… Almighty God! you gave me all the joy the world can offer!…'

At this point, Erik collapsed, gasping, onto the chair.

'I'm not ready to die just yet… but the time will come… soon… until then let me cry,' the man in the mask told the Persian.

But a moment later, he resumed:

'Listen, Daroga… listen carefully… as I knelt before her, I heard her say: "Poor, unhappy Erik!" *and she took me by the hand!*… From that moment, I was a faithful dog ready to die for her… that is exactly what I was!

'In my hand I had a ring, the same gold ring I'd once given her… the one she'd lost and I had found… a wedding ring!… I slipped it into her tiny hand and said: "Here, take this… it's for you… and for him… Let it be my wedding present to you both… a present from poor, unhappy Erik… I know you love the boy… don't cry!…" In her gentle voice she asked me what I meant… I explained… and she saw at once not only that I was just a poor dog ready to die for her but also that she could marry her young man whenever she liked because she had wept with me… oh Daroga!… as I said those words it was as if I had cut my own heart into pieces. But she had wept with me!… she had said: "*Poor, unhappy Erik!*"'

He was so overcome that he was obliged to warn the Daroga to look away, for he couldn't breathe and would have to remove his mask. By his account, the Persian, himself almost engulfed by pity, moved to the window where he deliberately focused on the tops of the trees in the Tuileries Gardens so that there was no possibility of glimpsing Erik's face reflected in the glass.

'Then I went and released the boy and took him back to where Christine was waiting… I saw them kiss in the Louis-Philippe salon… Christine had my ring on her finger… I made her swear that when I was dead, she would come one night, through the gate in the Rue Scribe, and secretly bury me with the gold ring which she was to go on wearing until that time… I told her where she'd find my body and what she was to do with it… Then *she* kissed *me*, for the first time, here, on the forehead—don't look, Daroga—*my* forehead—no! don't look, Daroga!—and they left together… Christine had stopped crying… but I cried on… alone… Daroga, if Christine keeps her promise it won't be long before she comes back to the house by the lake!…'

Erik fell silent. The Persian had not asked any other questions. He had been reassured that Christine and the Viscount were safe. No *member of the human race* who heard what was said that night could have doubted the weeping Erik's word.

The monster put his mask back on and gathered his strength before taking his leave. He said that when he felt the end approach, and it would not be long, he would be in touch and, to repay the Persian for the service he had once done him, he would send him his most precious possessions: Christine's papers which contained her account of her ordeal, written as it was going on, which she had meant for Raoul but had left with Erik, together with a few mementos: a couple of handkerchiefs, a pair of gloves and a buckle from one of her shoes. In answer to a question from the Persian, Erik told him that once they were free the couple had decided to find a priest in some distant place where they could be happy, safe from prying eyes. They had gone straight to the Gare du Nord and taken a train… north. Lastly, Erik said he would be obliged if the Persian, when he received the promised relics and papers, would inform Christine and Raoul of his death. This he would do by inserting a brief notice in the births and deaths columns of *L'Époque*.

There was nothing left to say.

The Persian went with Erik as far as the door of his apartment. Darius helped him down to the street where a cab was waiting. The Persian, watching from a window, heard him tell the driver: 'Take me to the Opera!'

The cab disappeared into the night. The Persian had seen poor, unhappy Erik for the last time.

Three weeks later, *L'Époque* published this brief announcement:

'ERIK IS DEAD.'

EPILOGUE

So ends the true story of the Phantom of the Opera.

As I observed on the first page of this book, no one can doubt the reality of Erik's existence. Too much irrefutable evidence is now so generally available that virtually anyone is in a position to follow Erik's exploits and their role in 'the Chagny Affair'.

There is no need to recapitulate here the tremendous effect it had on public opinion in the capital. A diva abducted, the Count de Chagny dead in such unusual circumstances, his brother reported missing and the three lighting hands drugged at the Opera!… what excitement, passion and crimes had punctuated the romance between Raoul and the lovely Christine!… Whatever had become of the wonderful but mysterious soprano whom the world would never hear sing again?… She was portrayed as the victim of the rivalry between the two brothers. No one had any inkling of what had really happened, nor did anyone understand that the disappearance of Raoul and Christine simply meant that they had fled the limelight in order to enjoy their happiness which, after the unexplained death of Count Philippe, they had no wish to expose to the glare of publicity… One day they had got on a train which took them north from the Gare du Nord… Perhaps one day I too might take a train from that same station and go prospecting around the lakes of Norway or silent Scandinavia in search of perhaps the still living traces of Raoul and Christine, and of Mme Valerius too, for she also disappeared around the same time!… Perhaps one day I shall hear the solitary mountains of the North of the World echo with the voice of one who once had known the Angel of Music?

Long after the case—unsolved thanks to the unintelligent handling of M. Faure, the examining magistrate—was officially closed, the press still returned to it from time to time in the hope of getting to the bottom of the mystery, still wanting to know the identity of the monstrous mind responsible for planning and engineering so many crimes and disappearances.

Only one popular newspaper, with a keen ear for backstage gossip, had actually gone so far as to state: 'The monster was the Phantom of the Opera!'

But even that claim was made with the paper's tongue firmly planted in its cheek.

The truth was known only to the Persian. But having been turned away once by the police, he never again attempted to repeat the experience after Erik's visit.

In his possession was crucial evidence which had been sent to him, along with the sacred relics, by the Phantom. It fell to me to fill in the remaining gaps, which I did with his help.

I kept him informed daily about the progress of my enquiries and he pointed me in the right direction. He had not been back to the Opera for many years, but his memories of the place were extremely accurate. I could not have had a better guide to assist me in exploring its remotest corners. He also told me the best places to get at the facts and the best people to interview. He it was who urged me to knock on the door of M. Poligny when the poor man was more or less on his deathbed. I had no idea he was so ill and I shall never forget the effect my questions about the Phantom had on him. He stared at me as if I were the devil incarnate and gave me a few disjointed answers which nevertheless confirmed (and that was what really mattered) the tremendous impact which the P. of the O. had made at the time on his somewhat irregular private life (he was what is usually called a rake).

When I gave the Persian the meagre results of my visit to M. Poligny, he smiled a thin smile and said: 'Poligny never knew to what extent the infamous villain (sometimes the Persian spoke of Erik as though he'd been a demigod, at others as if he were scum) had run rings round him. Poligny was superstitious and Erik knew it. Erik knew a great many things about the public business and private affairs of the Opera. So when M. Poligny heard a mysterious voice in Box 5 upbraiding him for the life he led and abusing the trust of his co-Director, he did not wait to learn more. Convinced that he had heard the voice of God, he believed he was damned and it was only when the voice demanded money that he finally realized that he was being strung along by a master blackmailer of whom Debienne was also a victim. For various reasons both men were tired of running the Opera and departed without making any further efforts to investigate the elusive Phantom who had made them sign up to the ruinous "memorandum of agreement". They bequeathed the entire mystery to their successors, heaved a great sigh of relief and left, having laid down a burden which had nonplussed both of them and amused neither.'

Such was the rather dim view the Persian took of Messrs Debienne and Poligny.

While he was on the subject, I asked him about their successors. I expressed surprise that in his *Memoirs of a Theatre Manager*, Moncharmin should have given such a full account of the P. of the O.'s misdeeds in Part I and then said more or less nothing in Part II. To this the Persian, who was so familiar with his *Memoirs* that he might have written them himself, commented that I'd find the whole business explained if I'd take time to think about a brief passage in the second part where Moncharmin returned to the subject of the Phantom. Here is the passage in question which is of particular interest since it gives a very straightforward account of the way the business of the 20,000 francs ended:

> 'With regard to the P. of the O.,' wrote Moncharmin, 'certain of whose fanciful exploits I recalled at the beginning of these *Memoirs*, I have only one thing to add and it is this. With one fine gesture, he redeemed all the trouble he caused my friend and co-Director and, I cannot deny it, myself. I assume that he eventually realized that a joke can be carried too far, especially when it involves large amounts of cash and a high-ranking police officer. A few days after the disappearance of Christine Daaé, at the very time which we had arranged to meet M. Mifroid in our office and were about to tell him the whole story, there on Richard's desk we found a large envelope. On the outside the following words had been written in red ink: "With the compliments of the P. of the O." Inside it were the very substantial sums which he had temporarily and amusingly managed to extract from the Directors' strongbox. Richard immediately took the view that matters should be left there and no further action taken. I agreed to endorse Richard's point of view. All's well that ends well—don't you agree, you mischievous P. of the O.?'

It is quite obvious that Moncharmin, especially after the money was returned, went on believing that for a short period he had been the victim of Richard's waggish imagination just as for his part Richard remained convinced that Moncharmin had invented the whole business of the P. of the O. as retaliation for pranks which had been played on him.

This was my moment to ask the Persian how the Phantom had managed to purloin the 20,000 francs which had been secured inside Richard's pocket with the safety pin. He said he had never actually looked into this minor detail, but if I examined the location myself I would doubtless come up with the answer in the Directors' office, provided I bore in mind that Erik was not known as a Master of Traps for nothing. I promised the Persian I would do so as soon as I could. Let me say here that the result of my investigations was entirely satisfactory. Indeed, I never dreamed I would ever find so much irrefutable evidence to show that the strange happenings attributed to the Phantom did really happen.

The reader is also entitled to know that the Persian's narrative, Christine's papers, the statements given to me by those who served under Messrs Richard and Moncharmin, by little Meg* (sadly, the worthy Mme Giry has since died) and La Sorelli, who has retired to Louveciennes—the reader, as I say, is entitled to know that this body of information, which provides documentary proof that there really was a Phantom and which I propose to hand over to the Opera's archives, has been corroborated by a number of significant discoveries of which I think I can justly be proud.

I have not, however, succeeded in locating the house by the lake. As a final act, Erik had destroyed all the secret entrances to it. But I remain convinced that it would be easy to reach it if the lake were drained, as I have several times proposed to the Ministry of Fine Arts.[1] But at least I was able to find the Communards' tunnel, though the planking has rotted in places, and also the trapdoor through which Raoul and the Persian dropped down into the lower levels of the theatre. In the cell dug by the Communards, I found initials scratched on the walls by those who were held there, and among them an 'R' and a 'C': 'RC'? Surely this is significant: Raoul de Chagny! At the time of writing, the letters are still clearly visible. Of course, I did not stop there. In the first and third levels down, I managed to open two pivot-operated doors unknown to the stagehands who are familiar only with horizontal, sliding traps.

Finally, I can say to the reader without fear of contradiction: Visit the Opera one of these days, ask to be allowed to wander around alone, without some ignorant guide, go into Box 5 and tap the enormous column which separates it from the proscenium arch. Tap it with cane or fist and listen at head height: *it will sound hollow!* You won't be surprised to learn that it was once the channel for the voice of the Phantom. Inside that column, there is room enough for two men, let alone one. If you are astonished that during all those mysterious occurrences in Box 5 no one ever took a moment to examine the column, remember that it looks like solid marble and that the voice which emerged from it seemed to come from the opposite wall (naturally, Erik being a ventriloquist, could make his voice come from whatever direction he chose). The column is ornately carved, having been worked and reworked by the sculptor's chisel, and I have yet to locate the specific feature which was designed to be raised or lowered and thus facilitate the Phantom's mysterious conversations and dealings with Mme Giry.* But everything I have managed to see, feel and touch represents just one small part of what a being as colossal and phenomenal as Erik must have secretly built inside an edifice as monumental as the Paris Opera House. Still, I would exchange all its remaining hidden mysteries for the one particular discovery I was privileged to make, in the Director's office, in his presence. Only centimetres from his desk chair, I found a panel, no longer than a wooden floor block or a man's forearm… a flap which closes like the lid of a chest, through which I could imagine a hand appear and skilfully rummage through the dangling tails of a man's evening-dress coat…

And that was how the 40,000 francs had been purloined!… It was also, with some adroit arm-work, how the money had been returned…

When, understandably elated, I told the Persian about what I had found, I asked:

'Since the forty thousand francs were returned, was Erik just playing around, simply having a joke with his "memorandum of terms and conditions"?'

He replied:

'Don't believe it for one moment!… Erik needed the money. Considering himself to be beyond the human pale, he was not constrained by moral scruples and used the immense gifts of dexterity and imagination which he had received from nature to compensate for the appalling disfigurement with which he had been afflicted: he used his talents to exploit people. His schemes, though sometimes devised and executed with the flair of an artist, usually made him a profit. If he returned the forty thousand francs to Messrs Richard and Moncharmin of his own accord, it was because *he no longer needed the money!* He had given up all thought of marrying Christine Daaé. He wanted nothing more to do with what life at ground level could offer.'

According to the Persian, Erik was born in a small town near Rouen, the son of a builder. He had run away from home at an early age, for his ugliness filled his parents with horror and disgust. For a period he had been exhibited as a freak in fairground shows where he was billed as 'The Living Corpse'. He seems to have travelled from fair to fair throughout Europe with a group of gypsies* with whom he completed his education as artist and magician. Then follows a blank phase of his life. He next surfaces at the Great Fair of Nizhnii Novgorod.* where, in all his majestic ugliness, he made a huge impression. By now, he had already learned to sing like no one else had ever sung before; he also demonstrated his skills as a ventriloquist and a magician of extraordinary dexterity. Caravans returning to Asia spread word of him and it was in this way that his fame travelled as far as the walls of the palace of Mazanderan where the young Sultana, the favourite wife of the Shah, was bored. A passing furmerchant, on his way to Samarkand from Nizhnii Novgorod, told stories of the wonders he had seen Erik perform. The merchant was summoned to the Palace and the Daroga of Mazanderan was charged with questioning him. The Daroga was ordered to find Erik. He brought him back to Persia where, for several months, as we say in Europe, he 'ruled the roost'. He used his power to commit a number of atrocities, for he seemed to have forgotten the difference between good and evil. He participated in several elegantly planned political assassinations with the same cool calculation he brought to turning diabolical inventions of his own creation against the Emir of Afghanistan who was then at war with Persia.* The Shah took to him. It was now that we can place the *Rosy Hours of Mazanderan* of which the Persian's narrative has given us some idea. Knowing that Erik had very particular ideas about architecture and thought of palaces the way magicians think of trick cabinets with false bottoms, the Shah commanded him to design and construct a building along just those lines. Erik obliged and the result was apparently so ingenious that His Highness could walk through every part of it without being seen and disappear without anyone knowing how. Now master of this gem, the Shah then behaved towards Erik the way a tsar had once treated the brilliant architect of a church in Red Square in Moscow: he ordered his yellow eyes to be put out. But, he thought, even if Erik were blind, he could still build a palace no less amazing for another monarch. At the very least, as long as Erik was alive, someone would know the secrets of his fabulous palace of tricks. So he decided that he and all the labourers who had worked under Erik's orders would have to be put to death. The Daroga of Mazanderan was ordered to carry out this odious diktat. Erik had done him a few good turns in the past and often provided him with excellent entertainment. He saved Erik's life by helping him to escape but his generous gesture almost cost him his own life. Fortunately for him, a body was washed up on the shores of the Caspian Sea. It had been half-eaten by seabirds but was identified as Erik's because the Daroga's friends had dressed the remains in clothes which had belonged to him. The Daroga escaped death but lost the Shah's favour, his property was seized and he was banished. However, since he was of royal blood, the Persian exchequer continued to pay him a small pension worth a few hundred francs a month. It was then that he sought asylum in Paris.

Meanwhile, Erik had fled to Asia Minor and ended up in Constantinople where he entered the service of the Sultan. You will understand how great a service he rendered a ruler who lived in constant fear of assassination if I say that it was Erik who built all the famous trapdoors, secret chambers and mysterious strongrooms which were discovered in the Yilditz-Kiosk after the recent Turkish revolution.[1] It was also Erik who came up with the idea of creating robots dressed like the Monarch and looking exactly like the Monarch, which made it seem as though the Commander of the Faithful was awake in one place when in reality he was sleeping in another.*

It goes without saying that he was eventually forced to leave the Sultan's service for the same reason that had obliged him to flee Persia: he knew too much. And so, weary of the dangerous, precarious, odious life he led, he longed to become ordinary, *like everyone else*. So he set up as a builder, the sort of builder who builds ordinary houses with ordinary bricks for ordinary people. He was one of the subcontractors who laid the foundations for the new Paris Opera House. But when he saw the vast area under the huge theatre, his natural leanings to the artistic and the imaginative, to *wizardry*, regained the upper hand. Anyway, wasn't he just as hideous to look at as ever? So he dreamed of building a home unknown to the rest of the world, where he could live hidden from the eyes of men.

You know or can guess the rest, for the answer is contained in this unlikely yet utterly true story. Poor, unhappy Erik! Should we feel sorry for him? Should we damn him? All he ever wanted was to be like everyone else! But he was just too ugly. He was forced to choose between hiding his genius or wasting it performing tricks, whereas, with an ordinary face, he might have been as noble a man who ever lived! He had a heart big enough to hold the whole world but in the end he had to make do with a hole in the ground! Surely, the Phantom of the Opera deserves all our sympathy!

I stood over his remains and, despite all his crimes, I prayed that God would have mercy on his soul! Why did God allow any man to be so ugly as Erik?

Oh yes, I am sure, quite sure, that it was his body I prayed over that day when it was dug out of the ground at the very spot where the phonographic records of living voices were being buried. It was his skeleton. It wasn't the ugliness of the skull that told me it was him, for when people have been dead for as long as that, they're all ugly. It was the plain gold ring he was wearing. Christine Daaé must have slipped it on his finger when, as promised, she had come to put him in his last resting place.

The skeleton was found not far from the spring where, when he first dragged her down into the darkness below the stage, the Angel of Music had held the unconscious Christine Daaé in his trembling arms.

And now, what is to be done with the skeleton? Will it be thrown into the common grave?… This is my view: the proper place of the Phantom of the Opera is in the archives of the National Academy of Music.

It is no ordinary skeleton.

[1] I would be ungrateful indeed if, as I embark on this terrifying but true story, I did not also thank the current management of the Opera, who so generously facilitated all my enquiries and in particular M. Messager; also the most helpful Administrator, M. Gabion, and that very friendly architect assigned to the preservation of the fabric who never hesitated to lend me the works of Charles Garnier, even though it was almost certain that I would never return them. Finally, all it remains for me is to acknowledge publicly the generosity of my friend and former colleague, M. J.-L. Croze, who allowed me to delve deeply into his wonderful library of theatre books and to borrow unique editions which he valued highly.—G.L.*

[1] I was told this anecdote, which is also absolutely true, from no less a person than M. Pedro Gailhard,* a former Director of the Opéra de Paris.

[1] M. Pedro Gailhard told me personally that he himself had continued the practice and created such employment for elderly stagehands whom he was reluctant to dismiss.

[1] In those days, it was the job of firemen, when there were no performances, to oversee the general safety of the Opera House. This practice has subsequently been discontinued. I asked M. Pedro Gaillard why and he said that 'it was because, given their total lack of familiarity with the areas under the stage, *they themselves were considered a fire hazard*'.

[1] The author is no more prepared than the Persian to provide a more detailed explanation of this sudden shadowy materialization. Explanations for everything else in this absolutely true story, however outlandish on the surface, will normally be provided. But I cannot say in so many words exactly what the Persian meant by replying: 'He is something far worse than that!' (worse, that is, than being a member of the theatre police). Readers will have to work it out for themselves, for I have given a solemn undertaking to the ex-Director of the Paris Opera, M. Pedro Gailhard, never to make public the secret of the fascinating and very useful individual who wanders like a shadow in a cloak. By condemning himself to a life spent confined to the cavernous regions beneath the Opera House, he has rendered signal services to opera-goers who, on gala concert nights for example, are bold enough to venture into the lower depths. I speak here of security matters and I am not at liberty, I swear, to be more specific.

[1] The former Director of the Opera, M. Pedro Gailhard once told me at Cap d'Ail, at the home of Mme Pierre Wolff,* about the huge amount of damage caused by rats until the theatre management, at a pretty hefty cost, employed a man who claimed he could eradicate the problem by patrolling the lower depth at fortnightly intervals.

Since then, there have been no rats anywhere in the theatre except for those delightful *rats d'Opéra*, the little girls who still attend ballet classes. M. Gailhard thought the man must gave invented some secret unguent which attracted rats in the same way that fish cannot resist the special lure which some anglers apply to their legs. The rats followed while he led them to some deep pit or other into which, intoxicated by the scent, they fell and drowned. We have already noted how the appearance of this blazing face caused the fire-officer to panic and lose consciousness (source: private conversation with M. Gailhard). My own view is that the fiery head encountered by Papin is the one which also gave the Persian and the Viscount de Chagny such a terrible fright (source: private papers of the Persian).

[1] No one ever recovered either pair of these ankle-boots which, according to the Persian's private papers, were left between the flat and the backcloth of *Le Roi de Lahore*, at the exact spot where Joseph Buquet was found hanged. They were in all probability taken by a stagehand or door-boy.

[1] *Daroga* is a Persian word meaning the overall chief of the country's police.

[1] An official report from Tonkin received in Paris in late July 1909, told how De Tham, the notorious bandit chief, was pinned down by French soldiers yet managed to escape along with all his men by using hollow reeds to breathe through.*

[1] Here the Persian could also have admitted that Erik's fate concerned him too, for he knew that if the government of Tehran discovered that Erik was still alive, it would have meant the end of the ex-Daroga's modest pension. But it is only fair to add that the Persian had a noble and generous heart and I have no doubt that the dangers which he feared would befall others genuinely exercised his mind. His conduct throughout the whole affair provides ample proof of that, for it was beyond reproach.

[1] It is easy to see why, at the time of writing, the Persian should have gone to such lengths to forestall disbelief. Since those days people have had ample opportunity of visiting 'halls' and 'palaces' of this kind and such precautions are now unnecessary.*

[1] Not forty-eight hours before the publication of this book I raised this very matter with the very helpful M. Dujardin-Beaumetz,* Under-Secretary of State for Arts, who offered me a glimmer of hope. I stated my view that the State has a duty to demystify the legend of the Phantom of the Opera once and for all and set the strange story of Erik on a basis of undisputed fact. For this to happen (and it would be the culmination of my enquiries) the house by the lake would have to be found, for it may turn out to contain invaluable contributions to the art of music. No one can doubt that Erik was a musical genius. Who is to say that we would not recover the score of his magnificent *Don Juan Triumphant*?

[1] Interview given by Mohammed-Ali Bey to the special correspondent of *Le Matin*, shortly after Salonika sent troops into Constantinople.

APPENDIX
THE PARIS OPERA HOUSE

That Mr Leroux has used, for the scene of his story, the Paris Opera House as it really is and has not created a building out of his imagination, is shown by this interesting description of it taken from an article which appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1879, a short time after the building was completed:

'The New Opera House, commenced under the Empire and finished under the Republic, is the most complete building of its kind in the world and in many respects the most beautiful in Europe. No European capital possesses an Opera House so comprehensive in plan and execution, and none can boast an edifice equally vast and splendid.

'The site of the Opera House was chosen in 1861. It was determined to lay the foundation exceptionally deep and strong. It was well known that water would be met with, but it was impossible to foresee at what depth or in what quantity it would be found. Exceptional depth also was necessary, as the stage arrangements were to be such as to admit a scene fifty feet high to be lowered on its frame. It was therefore necessary to lay a foundation in a soil soaked with water which should be sufficiently solid to sustain a weight of 22,000,000 pounds, and at the same time to be perfectly dry, as the cellars were intended for the storage of scenery and properties. While the work was in progress, the excavation was kept free from water by means of eight pumps, worked by steam power, and in operation, without interruption, day and night from March second to October thirteenth. The floor of the cellar was covered with a layer of concrete, then with two coats of cement, another layer of concrete and a coat of bitumen. The wall includes an outer wall as a coffer dam, a brick wall, a coat of cement, and a wall proper, a little over a yard thick. After all this was done the whole was filled with water, in order that the fluid, by penetrating into the most minute interstices, might deposit a sediment which would close them more surely and perfectly than it would be possible to do by hand. Twelve years elapsed before the completion of the building, and during that time it was demonstrated that the precautions taken secured absolute impermeability and solidity.

'The events of 1870 interrupted work just as it was about to be prosecuted most vigorously, and the new Opera House was put to new and unexpected uses. During the siege, it was converted into a vast military storehouse and filled with a heterogeneous mass of goods. After the siege the building fell into the hands of the Commune and the roof was turned into a balloon station. The damage, however, was slight.

'The fine stone employed in the construction was brought from quarries in Sweden, Scotland, Italy, Algeria, Finland, Spain, Belgium and France. While work on the exterior was in progress, the building was covered in by a wooden shell, rendered transparent by thousands of small panes of glass. In 1867, a swarm of men, supplied with hammers and axes, stripped the house of its habit, and showed in all its splendour the great structure. No picture can do justice to the rich colours of the edifice or to the harmonious tone resulting from the skilful use of many diverse materials. The effect of the frontage is completed by the cupola of the auditorium, topped with a cap of bronze sparingly adorned with gilding. Farther on, on a level with the towers of Notre Dame, is the gable end of the roof of the stage, a "Pegasus", by M. Lequesne, rising at either end of the roof, and a bronze group by M. Millet,* representing "Apollo lifting his golden lyre", commanding the apex. Apollo, it may here be mentioned, is useful as well as ornamental, for his lyre is tipped with a metal point which does duty as a lightning rod, and conducts the fluid to the body and down the nether limbs of the god.

'The spectator, having climbed ten steps and left behind him a gateway, reaches a vestibule in which are statues of Lully, Rameau, Gluck and Handel. Ten steps of green Swedish marble lead to a second vestibule for ticket-sellers. Visitors who enter by the pavilion reserved for carriages pass through a hallway where ticket offices are situated. The larger number of the audience, before entering the auditorium, traverse a circular vestibule located exactly beneath it. The ceiling of this portion of the building is upheld by sixteen fluted columns of Jura stone, with white marble capitals, forming a portico. Here servants are to await their masters, and spectators may remain until their carriages are summoned. The third entrance, which is quite distinct from the others, is reserved for the Executive. The section of the building set aside for the Emperor Napoleon* was to have included an antechamber for the bodyguards; a salon for the aides-de-camp; a large salon and a smaller one for the Empress; hat and cloak rooms, etc. Moreover, there were to be in close proximity to the entrance, stables for three coaches, for the outriders' horses, and for the twenty-one horsemen acting as an escort; a station for a squad of infantry of thirty-one men and ten *centgardes*,* and a stable for the horses of the latter; and, besides, a salon for fifteen or twenty domestics. Thus arrangements had to be made to accommodate in this part of the building about one hundred persons, fifty horses, and half-a-dozen carriages. The fall of the Empire suggested some changes, but ample provision still exists for emergencies.

'Its novel conception, perfect fitness, and rare splendour of material, make the grand stairway unquestionably one of the most remarkable features of the building. It presents to the spectator, who has just passed through the subscribers' pavilion, a gorgeous picture. From this point he beholds the ceiling formed by the central landing; this and the columns sustaining it, built of Echaillon stone, are honey-combed with arabesques and heavy with ornaments; the steps are of white marble, and antique red marble balusters rest on green marble sockets and support a balustrade of onyx. To the right and to the left of this landing are stairways to the floor, on a plane with the first row of boxes. On this floor stand thirty monolith columns of Sarrancolin marble, with white marble bases and capitals. Plasters of peach-blossom and violet stone are against the corresponding walls. More than fifty blocks had to be extracted from the quarry to find thirty perfect monoliths.

'The *foyer de la danse* has particular interest for habitués of the Opera. It is a place of reunion to which subscribers to three performances a week are permitted between the acts in accordance with a usage established in 1870. Three immense looking glasses cover the back wall of the *foyer*, and a chandelier with one hundred and seven burners supplies it with light. The paintings include twenty oval medallions in which are portrayed twenty *danseuses* of most celebrity since the opera has existed in France, and four panels by M. Boulanger, typifying "The War Dance", "The Rustic Dance", "The Dance of Love" and "The Bacchic Dance". While the ladies of the ballet receive their admirers in this *foyer*, they can practise their steps. Velvet-cushioned bars have to this end been secured at convenient points, and the floor has been given the same slope as that of the stage, so that the labour expended may be thoroughly profitable to the performance. The singers' *foyer*, on the same floor, is a much less lively resort than the *foyer de la danse*, as vocalists rarely leave their dressing-rooms before they are summoned to the stage. Thirty panels with portraits of the artists of repute in the annals of the Opera are shown in this *foyer*.

'Some estimate … may be arrived at by sitting before the *concierge* an hour or so before the representation commences. First appear the stage carpenters, who are always seventy, and sometimes, when *L'Africaine*, for example, with its ship scene, is the opera, one hundred and ten strong. Then come stage upholsterers, whose sole duty is to lay carpets, hang curtains, etc; gas-men, and a squad of firemen. *Claqueurs*, call-boys, property-men, dressers, *coiffeurs*, supernumeraries, and artists, follow. The supernumeraries number about one hundred: some are hired by the year, but the "masses" are generally recruited at the last minute and are generally working-men who seek to add to their meagre earnings. There are about a hundred choristers, and about eighty musicians.

'Next we behold equerries, whose horses are hoisted on the stage by means of an elevator, electricians who manage the light-producing batteries, *hydrauliciens* to take charge of the water-works in ballets like *La Source*; artificers who prepare the conflagration in *Le Profeta*; florists who make ready Marguerita's garden, and a host of minor employees. This personnel is provided for as follows. Eighty dressing-rooms are reserved for the artists, each including a small antechamber, the dressing-room proper, and a little closet. Besides these apartments, the Opera has a dressing-room for sixty male, and another for fifty female choristers; a third for thirty-four male dancers; four dressing-rooms for twenty female dancers of different grades; a dressing-room for one hundred and ninety supernumeraries, etc.'

A few figures taken from the article will suggest the enormous capacity and the perfect convenience of the house. 'There are 2,531 doors and 7,593 keys; 14 furnaces and 450 grates heat the house; the gaspipes if connected would form a pipe almost 16 miles long; 9 reservoirs, and two tanks hold 22,222 gallons of water and distribute their contents through 22,829 feet of piping; 538 persons have places assigned wherein to change their attire. The musicians have a foyer with 100 closets for their instruments.'

The author remarks of his visit to the Opera House that it 'was almost as bewildering as it was agreeable. Giant stairways and colossal halls, huge frescos and enormous mirrors, gold and marble, satin and velvet, met the eye at every turn.'

In a recent letter, Mr André Castaigne,* whose remarkable pictures illustrate the text, speaks of a river or lake under the Opera House and mentions the fact that there are now also three metropolitan railway* tunnels, one on top of the other.